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Miri Mikawa
Kasumi Nagi



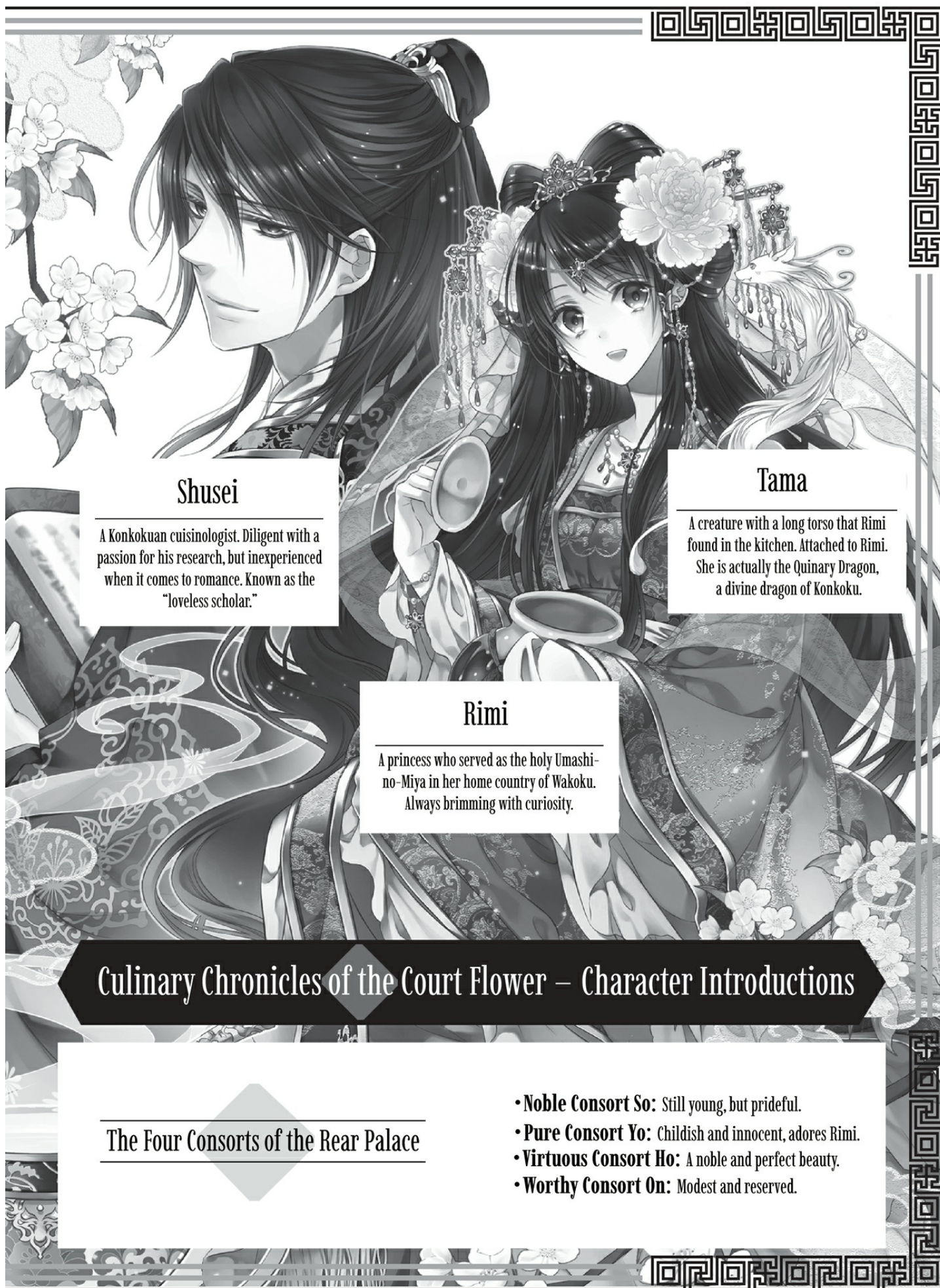
*Culinary
Chronicles
of the Court
Flower*



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Shusei

A Konkoku cuisineologist. Diligent with a passion for his research, but inexperienced when it comes to romance. Known as the “loveless scholar.”

Tama

A creature with a long torso that Rimi found in the kitchen. Attached to Rimi. She is actually the Quinary Dragon, a divine dragon of Konkoku.

Rimi

A princess who served as the holy Umashi-no-Miya in her home country of Wakoku. Always brimming with curiosity.

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions

The Four Consorts of the Rear Palace

- **Noble Consort So:** Still young, but prideful.
- **Pure Consort Yo:** Childish and innocent, adores Rimi.
- **Virtuous Consort Ho:** A noble and perfect beauty.
- **Worthy Consort On:** Modest and reserved.



Jotetsu

A military officer who serves
as Shohi's bodyguard.



Hakurei

An enchantingly beautiful eunuch.
Serves Shohi directly.



Shohi

The emperor of the great empire
of Konkoku. Cruel and heartless.

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Spring was in its waning days. The breeze was perfectly warm, and everything graced by the sun's rays heralded the arrival of summer. In the imperial palace of Konkoku, tucked in a corner of the Ministry of Rites, was the cuisinology hall. The books covering the walls and few windows meant the scent of ink was thick within the space. In contrast to the warmth outside, the air here was cold and heavy. One could feel the cool, stone floor leech the heat right through their shoes.

Perhaps the chilling atmosphere was a result of the building having lost its master.

"Did I make a mistake?"

Setsu Rimi sat alone, lost in thought as she gazed at the light escaping out a tiny window near the ceiling.

Early that morning, a messenger had arrived at the Palace of the Water Spirit where Rimi was temporarily staying. Shohi had summoned her to the palace, apparently wishing to speak to her about something. However, when Rimi had arrived, she had been told he was in a conference and she would need to wait at the cuisinology hall.

For more than half an hour she had waited, yet Shohi still hadn't appeared.

A little silver-furred creature with an elongated body sat atop Rimi's shoulder. She was Tama, a divine dragon. As if in response to Rimi's muttering, she gazed at Rimi with her big blue eyes and squeaked. *What's wrong?* she seemed to ask.

"There's so much I just don't understand," Rimi murmured.

Two days before, Shusei had reappeared without warning. But he was not the old Shusei. He had announced that he was the new head of the Ho House and had taken the name of Ho Shusei. Then, right in front of Shohi, he'd turned to Rimi and made a brazen declaration.

"I want you."

Rimi couldn't understand why Shusei was doing this.

She'd wanted to press him for answers, but immediately after making his proclamation, Shusei had excused himself. She hadn't found a chance to speak

directly with him since then.

Rimi and Shusei both knew that the love they held for each other was unacceptable, and so they had been actively burying their feelings. Then, just to pile on to that struggle, they had each learned the truth of Shusei's birth: he was the legitimate son of Ho Seishu.

If Rimi had pressed on with her feelings, Shusei's station, his very *life*, would have been in danger. Shusei himself had said in no uncertain terms that they needed to deny their feelings. In what world would it be right for Rimi to cling to those feelings when Shusei had let go? Wouldn't the right choice be to respect each other's duties and protect their places in the world?

Such thinking was what had driven Rimi to accept Shohi's marriage proposal. She would be his empress. She'd once believed that was the best course of action. She'd once believed it was *right*.

But now she wondered if it had all been a mistake.

Had Shusei become the master of the Ho House as a way of telling her that she had made the wrong decision?

Yet Shusei had been the one to say they needed to bury their feelings. During his tutoring to prepare Rimi for her enthronement, he had claimed that he wanted her to be the empress. If that was really how he felt, surely it was not connected with his decision to raise the banner of revolt against Shohi. But if everything he'd said was a lie, then perhaps Rimi really had made the wrong choice...

Whatever the case, right or wrong, Rimi's enthronement ceremony was proceeding as planned. The Executive Audience was already behind her and the Nocturnal Liturgy was tomorrow.

"Rimi," someone called from behind her, drawing Rimi from her thoughts. She turned to see who it was and was greeted by the sight of Ryu Shohi, the fifth emperor of Konkoku.

"Forgive me," Shohi said as he entered the room, "I called you all the way here from the Palace of the Water Spirit, yet I made you wait for me."

"I don't mind at all," Rimi said with a smile. Their eyes met, but Shohi averted

his gaze for some reason, seemingly uncomfortable. His long eyelashes cast shadows across his cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Rimi,” he said in a small voice after a moment’s hesitation, only to fall silent once more.

“What are you apologizing for, Your Majesty?”

Shohi paused for a moment as if trying to find the words.

“The Nocturnal Liturgy. It was supposed to be tomorrow, but I’ve decided to postpone it,” he said.

“Postpone it? Until when?”

“I cannot say. And so... I’m sorry.”

An indefinite postponement, in other words. And therefore, a suspension of Rimi’s enthronement ceremony. She was speechless.

“I’m sorry,” Shohi said. The words seemed to pain him. He bit his lip.

From atop Rimi’s shoulder, Tama gazed with her big, blue eyes at the young, suffering emperor.

During the year 113 of the Konkoku calendar, in the twilight of spring, it was as if a quiet earthquake had thrown the imperial court into upheaval.

Chapter 1: To Shake and Stir

I

“Noble Consort So, Pure Consort Yo, Worthy Consort On, Virtuous Consort Ho, could all of you please calm down?!”

The pathway leading to the emperor’s chambers was flanked on both sides by deutzia bushes, their buds growing strong and preparing to blossom in the warm spring air. A pleasant wind passed, rustling the vibrant greenery. It was along that pleasantly windswept pathway that Rimi chased desperately after the four consorts.

“Please! Hello?”

The consorts paid no mind to Rimi’s pleading voice. They simply continued marching, fury radiating from their entire bodies.

“Hello? Hellooooo?”

Finally, after an incessant barrage of calls from Rimi, So snapped her head around.

“Be quiet, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu! Just be quiet and follow!” she said.

“But His Majesty has agonized over this decision!” Rimi begged.

It was Virtuous Consort Ho’s turn to offer a sharp look to the overwhelmed Rimi.

“So we have to inform him that he’s agonizing about all the wrong things, don’t we?”

“That’s right! We’re putting our foot down, dearest!” Even Pure Consort Yo’s wide, adorable eyes glittered with rage.

“What do you mean by that?” Rimi asked.

“Just come with us, please,” Worthy Consort On said brusquely. Though her

words were meant to be calming, On's face was uncharacteristically stern.

Oh, what do I do?! Even On, who's usually so amiable, is really upset...

The four consorts resumed their forward march, leaving Rimi at a complete loss. She turned around to face the beautiful director who followed along behind them, his gait graceful as ever.

"Master Hakurei, please, help me persuade them! Make them understand I'm fine with this decision."

The hauntingly beautiful Director Sai Hakurei grinned widely as he squinted his golden-brown eyes.

"It's hopeless. Your feelings on the matter don't carry much weight with the consorts. It's His Majesty's decision that has upset them. My words will do little to quell their anger."

"Nooooo!"

It had all begun the day before when Shohi had summoned Rimi and declared he was postponing the Nocturnal Liturgy. For Shusei to not only suddenly reappear as the master of the Ho House but to also say that he wanted Rimi right in front of Shohi? Rimi could only imagine how much of a toll it had taken on the emperor. She wouldn't have been surprised if he was completely bewildered. Rimi herself was still dealing with the shock. At times, she wondered if it was all a bad dream. Even Chancellor Shu Kojin had been shaken by the events.

It was likely the Nocturnal Liturgy that had spurred Shusei into action, so it was only natural to postpone it.

Rimi understood that it was an unavoidable situation. She had returned to the Palace of the Water Spirit to inform the consorts. After all, they were even more excited about Rimi's enthronement ceremony than she was. Upon hearing the news, all four consorts erupted in fury.

"What does it matter who the head of the Ho House is?! That doesn't mean the Nocturnal Liturgy should be postponed! No matter what happens, an emperor ought to behave like one! If he's seeking an empress, he should show he can carry out the rituals with solemn dignity! And postponing it is making

Rimi wait! He's trampling all over her feelings!"

The consorts had rushed straight to Hakurei and made him arrange a meeting with Shohi so they could voice their complaints. Today, they'd strong-armed Rimi into joining them as they marched into the emperor's chambers.

Rimi had managed to prepare herself for the Nocturnal Liturgy, but she had not been able to bury her fear. Truthfully, she was a bit relieved that it was being postponed. Yet as the consorts said, Shohi was postponing the enthronement ritual because of the actions of a retainer. It was something that he should never have had to do, which pained Rimi.

I understand how they feel. But His Majesty is shaken, and I understand how he feels too. What am I supposed to do?!

Rimi's mind spiraled as she chased after the consorts.

As they neared the emperor's chambers, Shin Jotetsu came into view, standing just outside the doorway. Once, the man had held a position as a junior officer in the imperial guard, but now he was in Shohi's direct employ. He was tasked with serving the emperor as both bodyguard and attendant. Now, he greeted the consorts on his master's behalf, offering them an exaggerated bow.

"Well, well, well! If it isn't the four consorts! You look lovelier than ever."

Virtuous Consort Ho, the eldest, stepped forward without hesitation.

"We have no interest in your clumsy greetings. Is His Majesty in?" she said mercilessly.

Jotetsu grinned and ushered them toward the door with a sweep of his arm. The consorts responded with placid nods and passed him. As Rimi and Hakurei followed behind, he gave them a shrug.

At the far end of the room, Shohi was seated on a sofa. He was intently staring at a number of what appeared to be reports that sat in his lap. Upon noticing the consorts making their entrance, he turned his attention toward them.

The consorts came to the center of the room and bowed. Even in the throes

of fury, their training as consorts shone through. They did not forget their manners. Rimi and Hakurei knelt a few steps behind them.

“Enough, raise your heads,” Shohi commanded. “Speak, my four consorts. I was informed you were urgent in your desire for an audience with me.”

The consorts raised their heads. So was the first to speak.

“We came to inquire why you have postponed your Nocturnal Liturgy with Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu,” she said. Her tone was arguably belligerent, but Shohi didn’t even raise an eyebrow.

“I asked my dearest why,” Yo chimed in, “and she said it was because the cuisinologist now leads the Ho House. That the court was shaken by the arrival of a new master of Ho and that now was no time for a Nocturnal Liturgy. But we feel so forlorn that she’s being made to wait. My dearest may accept this, but I cannot.”

Even the four consorts were aware of Shusei’s sudden elevation to the master of the Ho House. Virtuous Consort Ho, as a member of the house, had heard directly about this revelation shortly after Shusei revealed himself to Shohi. The news had surprised and outraged all of them, but none more so than Consort Ho.

Grandfather, I must say, I have no clue what you are thinking. The man is a cuisinologist, of all things, she had written in a letter of protest.

“We understand that the matter concerning the Ho House is shocking, but do you not want the enthronement ceremony to proceed, Your Majesty? Is postponing it over such matters truly right?” On said. Despite being reserved, she did not mince her words.

“I beg you forgive my rudeness,” Ho added, “but you are emperor, and this decision is weak-kneed. In spite of my connection to Ho, I was not made aware of the change of heads. It is shameful that I could not be of help, but that is exactly why I do not want to see you sacrifice your dignity.”

Shohi expressionlessly bore the brunt of the consorts’ complaints. When Ho finished speaking, all four of them fixed their gazes on the emperor. Shohi gently closed his eyes and breathed a small sigh.

“I completely understand all of your anger. And I feel bad for Rimi as well. I also understand that you offer your advice out of concern for my authority,” Shohi said.

The four consorts blinked. Considering they were meddling in the emperor’s decisions, they had prepared themselves for a sharp rebuke at the least. And yet, he had simply let them speak. He had accepted their rage and opinions without resistance. It left the consorts stunned as they exchanged glances.

“But I have made my decision. The Nocturnal Liturgy will be postponed. That will not change,” Shohi stated.

“But why, Your Majesty?” So asked, frowning. “You say you understand, but your will is being subverted by your subject. How could you let that come to pass?”

“I cannot bring myself to do it,” he said.

“To do what?” Ho snapped. Shohi cast his gaze toward her.

“Shusei said that he wants Rimi.”

The consorts responded with shock at first, but that quickly gave way to bubbling fury. *Such insolence toward the emperor!* the consorts’ eyes seemed to cry. Before their anger toward Shusei could explode, Shohi continued, “Clearly if we move forward with the Nocturnal Liturgy, it will only spur Shusei into action. Kojin agreed it was a good idea to wait. Moreover, I just cannot bring myself to confront Shusei directly yet.”

“But why, Your Majesty?! The cuisinologist has been insolent! Why are you acting so weak?!” Yo, ever impatient and unable to hold back any longer, cried out as she stamped her foot on the ground.

“He has indeed been insolent. It is a betrayal. But I cannot seem to despise him. Not yet.”

Shohi’s voice was like a pained sigh, and it tugged at Rimi’s heartstrings. Even Hakurei furrowed his brow in apparent pain.

Judging by how their eyes widened in shock, the four consorts evidently felt Shohi’s pain as well. Their realization of how badly the emperor had been

wounded came as a massive blow.

Shusei had been by Shohi's side since they were both little. Shusei was like a big brother, the person who Shohi trusted and adored more than anyone. The shock of that betrayal would be enormous, and he was apparently still too wounded to feel anything like hate. Things might have been easier if he could hate Shusei, but right now, sorrow seemed to hold sway over him.

He and Rimi were the same. She understood that sorrow well and wondered what she could do to help him heal.

I can't think of anything other than making something delicious and getting him to eat it. I must make him something.

Shusei had been a source of support for the emperor, cooking him meals based on cuisinology. Even if she couldn't take Shusei's place in supporting Shohi, if she could at least treat him to a meal...

"Your Majesty?" Ho inquired. The consorts had been stunned into silence for a time, but she was the first to rise to her feet. Shohi turned his attention to her.

"I suppose you can't help but think of me as spineless, eh?" Shohi answered.

The consorts exchanged glances. On gave the other three a knowing nod before moving to speak.

"No, Your Majesty. That is a perfectly human emotion. You may be an emperor, but you are a man first. I do not think you need to lose your humanity in order to be emperor, and I do not believe we are the retainers of an inhuman liege." As On finished speaking, all four consorts gingerly kneeled. Each consort's skirt had a different color and design. The way they spread across the floor resembled four different flowers in bloom.

"Umm..." Yo began, embarrassed. "Please, forgive our rudeness, Your Majesty. We had no idea how you felt..."

"Your Majesty, we swore an oath to you at the Declaration of Stability that we would serve you with all of our power," On spoke with her eyes fixed on Shohi. "Nothing has changed since that day. That is all I will say."

Shohi finally lifted his head. As his eyes met the earnest gazes of the four consorts, his expression turned to astonishment. He seemed unable to comprehend the idea that his consorts, who had come to him in a fury, had heard him out and renewed their vow of support.

“His Majesty does not yet comprehend the depth of the four consorts’ sincerity and devotion,” Hakurei whispered with bitter amusement into Rimi’s ear.

Master Hakurei might be right, Rimi thought. After all, Shohi had said to Jotetsu that there were few people who he could trust. After being betrayed by Shusei, whom he had trusted for his entire life, he must have felt like he didn’t have a friend in the world. How frightening must that feel? How painful, how lonely?

Shusei must have known how Shohi would take his betrayal. *So then, why?* Rimi didn’t have an answer. Shusei overflowed with kindness. He had decided his place in the world was beside Shohi, supporting him. Would he really betray Shohi like that?

Unless...!

Was it possible that Shusei was pretending to betray Shohi with some other motive in mind? He would be far too cautious to say anything if he was indeed pretending. But Shohi was suffering. If Rimi begged Shusei on his behalf, maybe he would tell her?

I want to know. I have to know. What do you truly feel, Master Shusei?

Rimi longed to see him. But that longing was not purely out of love, as it had been until that moment. Her love was joined by unease and panic, which hung in her mind like dark clouds.

II

Meanwhile, the young man now known as Ho Shusei, former cuisinologist and grand councilor to the emperor, was leisurely roaming the palace grounds. Having removed his official garb, he had donned a dark-colored shenyi to match his composed mood. He had the air of a young royal about him.

A passing low-ranking official, unaware of who Shusei was but recognizing him as someone of a clearly greater status, offered a deep bow.

Shusei walked on a great road, wide enough to fit three huge carriages side by side and paved with thick cobbles that stretched out from the front gate of the Imperial Palace. It passed under two gates before leading on to the Hall of New Harmony. Known as the Dragon's Road, it was only used for the official comings and goings of the emperor.

Hugging the right side of the Dragon's Road was the Eastern District where buildings holding the ministries of Works, Personnel, and War crowded. On the left was the Western District with the ministries of Rites, Revenue, and Justice. The main stronghold of the imperial guards was located in the Imperial Palace's main gatehouse with auxiliary bases in the eastern and western gates.

Shusei was wandering the palace grounds under the pretense of saying his hellos. In truth, he was meeting with the ministers and vice-ministers of each ministry, starting with the imperial guards. He was informing them of his position as the legitimate child of Ho Seishu and the new master of the Ho House. Having finished with the guards and the Eastern District, he had now moved to the Western District.

This is going surprisingly well.

The reaction to the knowledge that the grand councilor and cuisinologist was actually the true son of Ho Seishu and master of the Ho House was always the same: shock and amazement. But beyond that, he was largely met with favorable smiles. It seemed that in addition to Shusei's unblemished reputation as the grand councilor, the court apparently spoke of Ho Seishu as a man of greatness.

The court officials knew that both the Ho House and the Ryu House vied for the throne, but it was believed to only be an issue upon the succession of a new emperor. Now, just a year after his ascension, it seemed on the surface that the two houses should have no quarrel.

However, some officials viewed the reign of the Ryu House coldly, while others whispered of how they wished for a Ho to take the throne. None of it had come to a head as of yet, but anyone could see the embers of discontent

glowing in the shadows.

Ho Neison, walking beside Shusei, stroked his white beard in apparent satisfaction.

“You wear the mantle of house head brilliantly. I couldn’t have asked for more, Shusei. Clearly, naming you as my successor was the right decision.”

“I am very grateful. I understand that Virtuous Consort Ho gave you quite the rebuke?”

“The girl may be the flower of the Ho House, but she’s also a fool who has lost her heart to the emperor of the Ryu House. Don’t pay her any mind.”

Shusei responded to Neison with a tactful smile. He then returned his attention straight ahead.

Minister of Revenue To Rihan and Minister of Rites Jin Keiyu are both known as Chancellor Shu Kojin’s right-hand men. They are likely, and naturally, incensed by my ascension to the head of the Ho House. But other than theirs, the responses from the ministers haven’t been bad at all.

It had been more than two decades since Seishu’s disappearance, but it seemed people longed for his return now more than ever. What sort of man had he been, Shusei wondered. As he was lost in that thought, three familiar faces appeared before him: Shu Kojin, To Rihan, and Jin Keiyu. They seemed to recognize Shusei at the same time, causing their pace to falter for a moment. However, as if to challenge him, they quickly adopted a very stately manner of walking.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the master of the Ho House. And the retired Master Neison as well,” Kojin said as he came right up to them. He gave a condescending bow while shooting a sharp glance at Shusei, who met his gaze unflinchingly.

Father... No, he’s just the chancellor to me now. Shu Kojin.

Having taken leadership of the Ho House, Shusei was now first rank as well, placing him alongside Kojin and above Rihan and Keiyu.

“I am pleased to see you in good health, Chancellor Shu,” were the first words

Shusei spoke to Kojin since revealing himself to Shohi. It was a brief exchange, one made with their relative statuses in mind. The tension and wariness between them were palpable.

Kojin's lips curled into a smile, but his eyes remained cold. The other two gave inscrutable grins. The old scar beneath Rihan's eye contorted, while Keiyu seemed somehow amused by the whole matter.

"As much as we would love to greet the new head of the Ho House properly, I'm afraid we have a meeting with His Majesty," Kojin said. The condescension in his tone conveyed a different message. *Bothering with you lot would be a waste of my time.* Neison's brow furrowed in displeasure. The tension in the atmosphere was reaching its peak.

Shusei, however, was inwardly surprised by Kojin's words. Such open attempts at provocation were proof that Kojin's confidence was suffering. Where Kojin's confidence fell, Shusei's grew, bringing a smile to his face.

"But of course, I know how busy you are. I'll be around to give you three a proper hello later," Shusei said. He had noticed Kojin momentarily balk at his smile and followed up immediately. "Until then."

"Filthy traitor," Rihan spat quietly as Shusei moved to pass them. Shusei had already expected some manner of abuse, so the words just made his smile grow.

"By all means, say whatever you like," Shusei said lightly.

"Ooh," Keiyu said, seemingly impressed. Rihan's face fell, but Kojin's expression didn't budge.

"Confident, aren't you, Shusei? How promising." Neison chuckled gleefully as the three disappeared. Watching Shusei's lack of concern for the sarcastic courtesy of the other three had apparently been a delight.

Shusei wasn't especially amused, however. He simply pondered the cold look Kojin had met him with. Hatred, anger, those things were easy to see in them. But there was something else he had felt there, something powerful. Fear. He had put on airs with Shusei, attempting to suppress that fear.

Shu Kojin fears me.

Until now, he must have been confident in his total understanding and control of Shusei. But with that shattered, his confidence must have been shaken.

Shusei's education under Kojin had been ruthless. He had been posed questions too complex for his young mind and tasked with learning far more than he could possibly remember. But day after day, he silently spared no effort to do as he was asked because he believed that if he met his father's expectations, the cold man would look at him with pride. Perhaps he would come to feel sympathy for his laboring son.

But that never came to pass. Not once. No matter how Shusei excelled, Kojin only met him with disinterest and more demands.

The training was so severe, it had been like Kojin was slowly strangling a detested child. He seemed to draw some relief from it. Shusei would rather have been killed or treated more cruelly, but instead, he was bound and ruled by this strange agony.

To Shusei, Kojin was a cruel, emotionless man. The only feeling he held toward him now was emptiness. It was all he felt for his past self as well, the boy who had wanted Kojin to love him as a father.

And yet, even a man like that had been shaken by Shusei's betrayal. It made him wonder how badly it had upset the young, inexperienced Shohi.

His Majesty must be shaken to his core. But I will be shaking him far more than this.

It was all a part of his plan. The plan to get what he wanted.

"On that note, how is *he* leaning?" Shusei asked Neison with narrowed eyes. The man's lips twisted into a wry, scornful smile.

"He's agreed, but what's the concern? He'd like to allow some time for his plan."

"As long as I'm in charge, we will proceed in the way I see fit."

"I have to say, I agree that it would be best not to rush matters."

"I ask that you not interfere. A wish you will honor. I am the head of this

family now, after all.”

Neison seemed taken aback by the strength of Shusei’s words, but he clearly saw little choice but to assent with a nod.

Shusei stared ahead expressionlessly. His plot was in motion. The whats and whos of his strategy would depend on how things unfolded. That was what it meant to adapt to the flow.



“What on earth could Shusei be thinking, taking on leadership of the Ho House after all this time? You raised him, Chancellor Shu. Surely you have some idea? I haven’t the slightest idea from the time he worked beneath me.”

Far from Shusei and Neison’s sight, Keiyu probed Kojin for answers in exasperation. Kojin, a few steps ahead of Keiyu and Rihan, answered without looking back.

“He is a fool. He fell for a *palace girl* of all things. Since the girl caught His Majesty’s eye and is to be empress, I presume that Shusei has chosen to move against His Majesty. Though I raised him as my own, he is the child of Ho Seishu. The man possessed immense ability, but he disappeared, did nothing with his life, and died. Shusei takes after his father.”

“A palace girl... Setsu Rimi, you mean. To think the cuisinologist, the embodiment of reason, would do all that for a single woman,” Rihan lamented.

“Never take matters of the heart lightly,” Keiyu said with a grin. “It can throw one’s life into chaos.”

“Which is exactly why he’s a fool,” Rihan said, glowering.

“Not like you’d know anything about it,” Keiyu retorted. He then nonchalantly turned his focus to Kojin. “I do wonder, Chancellor, why would you raise the child of a political enemy as your own son?”

“To keep a dangerous presence close at hand and under supervision. No other reason.”

“If it was me, I’d have secretly killed him while he was still a child. I’d think that would be safer.”

Rihan glared at Keiyu, who had spoken so casually of the idea.

“Do you hear yourself? You realize you’re talking about murdering a child?”

“Oh, you don’t have to be so dour, Rihan. I was speaking metaphorically.”

“I fail to see the metaphor.”

“There’s no need to get mad about it. Anyway...” Keiyu made a small motion toward Kojin, who had ignored their conversation and continued walking in silence. He lowered his voice. “Doesn’t the chancellor seem different to you? I wonder if he has a soft spot for Shusei. He didn’t even touch my comment about killing him.”

“You think the chancellor would dignify your nonsense? He has other things to worry about than Shusei. Have you forgotten why we’re all going to see His Majesty in the first place?”

“Even I’m not that forgetful. Who could forget a name like Kan Cho’un, Hero of the Countryside? And we’ve got Ma Ijun waiting as well. This must be an enormous headache as Minister of Revenue, eh, Rihan?”

“Ma Ijun is deeply tied up with diplomacy as well. You can’t afford to sit back and watch either. Not while he’s involved.”

The pair exchanged a silent glance, which seemed to say, *Now then, what are we going to do about this?*



Having been convinced of the need to postpone the Nocturnal Liturgy, the four consorts retired to the rear palace. If the Nocturnal Liturgy would not be going forward, then there was no need for them to remain with Rimi. Since Hakurei was serving as their attendant, he returned with them. Rimi, however, was caught in limbo. With the enthronement ceremony half-finished, she was left to remain in the Palace of the Water Spirit and would still not be returning to the rear palace.

Normally after excusing herself from the emperor’s chambers, Rimi would always return to the Palace of the Water Spirit. But this time, she requested to visit the cuisinology hall first. Surely somewhere among the books and Shusei’s assorted writings, she could find something to help Shohi.

Upon hearing her request, Shohi had suggested he accompany her. Rimi said what she was doing would be boring, but the emperor simply stated that he didn't mind. He and Jotetsu both followed her to the cuisinology hall.

"Do as you like," Shohi said. He went to busy himself, gazing at the shelves of books. Jotetsu sat down at a desk and yawned.

"Won't you be bored, Your Majesty?" Rimi said. "If only Tama was here, you could play with her. Unfortunately, she stayed behind at the Palace of the Water Spirit since I was with the four consorts."

Shohi seemed to have little to occupy himself with, so Rimi found herself worrying about him as she gathered books and other handwritten documents on a table. But Shohi pulled his focus from the spine of a book to look at her and shook his head slightly.

"The Quinary Dragon won't even let me touch it. I can't imagine it playing with me. So it's fine. Boring though it may be, until you return to the Palace of the Water Spirit, I can at least—"

Shohi suddenly froze and looked away, his cheeks reddening. Jotetsu chuckled at the sight.

"At least what, Your Majesty?" Jotetsu prodded. "'I can at least spend a little time with you,' am I right? Your romantic side is showing. Oh, maybe I should step outside?"

"Silence! I just want Rimi to know that even though I postponed the Nocturnal Liturgy, I am not unhappy with her," Shohi said.

"All right, all right. You really are one big romantic," Jotetsu teased as Shohi flushed even brighter.

Rimi looked away, finding herself a bit embarrassed as well. Pretending she didn't hear their conversation, she hurried over to the desk and picked up a piece of paper.

His Majesty is too kind. He must be so terribly sad over Master Shusei, yet he's still worried about me. I must find a way to help him.

What tormented him now more than anything was Shusei's betrayal and the

sorrow that came with it.

The least I can do is treat him to a meal. That will help. Which means I need to find ingredients with proven cuisinological effects and make them into something delicious.

Rimi wanted to see that moment when Shohi ate something delicious and gave a deep, relieved smile. She doubted there was a food that could heal someone's sorrow, but if she could find something to clear his mind and raise his energy, that would be enough.

She flipped through page after page. Shohi, who looked a bit sullen, approached the desk and peeked at what she was doing.

"What are you looking for?" he asked. "Why are we even here in the first place?"

"I thought I could maybe find an ingredient among the cuisinological documents that might be of help to Your Majesty," Rimi explained, "I feel like it's my duty to treat you to a cuisinological meal. It's the only thing I can do."

"Cuisinology..." Shohi mumbled. His voice sounded a touch pained as if he were grieving a loss. Perhaps he felt as if it were like a remnant of Shusei. "If you want to do something, grant me the ability to hate him." The words seemed to slip unintentionally from his mouth.

His handsome eyes and nose and his long, thick eyelashes. His sorrow-filled profile. The young emperor's piteous state only made him more beautiful. The sight of him made a question spring to mind.

"Y-Your Majesty?" Rimi inquired fearfully. "Are you really not upset with Master Shusei?"

III

"I am upset. I am frustrated," Shohi began after a moment's silence. "But more than that, I am constantly asking myself why this happened. That's what pains me. Shusei said he wants you, but I cannot think that's all it is. The longer I think about it, the more suffocating it all becomes. And my heart seems to linger behind, unable to reach the point of hate. What about you? Do you hate

the man who cast aside cuisinology to take up the mantle of the Ho House?”

“I feel the same. I don’t understand why Master Shusei would do all this, and it makes me feel anxious and bewildered. But the discipline of cuisinology that he invented is still useful to both you and me,” Rimi insisted. “I was his assistant, so no matter what happens with Master Shusei, I feel I should maintain both the cuisinology hall and the discipline of cuisinology.”

The idea that Shusei’s kind smile would no longer grace these halls was a painful one. But if Rimi allowed mere pain and loneliness to cripple her, she would lose the place where she belonged. She had given herself a place in the world. She had to protect it.

“No matter what happens with Shusei, hm?” Shohi said. Every time he spoke that name, his pupils quivered uneasily. The sight made Rimi realize just how beautiful his eyes were. The young emperor had been starved for love his whole life. He had put up a strong front for so long, and now he had lost one of the few people in the world he could trust. Yet rather than hating the one he’d lost, he mourned him. Rimi could see in him his innermost qualities: his forthrightness, his honesty, and his childlike nature.

Rimi could practically hear him crying out. *Why? I miss you.* He seemed inconsolable.

His Majesty’s heart hasn’t yet lost its beautiful, childlike innocence.

Maybe it was that beauty and sensitivity that made him retreat into a shell of cruelty so thick that it dulled even his sense of taste. But when that shell was broken, it revealed something beautiful and sensitive.

It was for the emperor’s sake that Rimi had cut ties with Wakoku and become a Konkokuan. She didn’t need to bother herself by trying to do something out of reach. She needed to stay focused, stand strong, and support the emperor by serving him a meal.

She would study cuisinology and Konkokuan cuisine, serving the emperor as a Konkokuan.

That is my duty. To use everything I’ve learned as Umashi-no-Miya here in this land. Isn’t that right, Lady Saigu? Her sister, the Saigu, resided eternally in

Rimi's heart, and she called on her for conviction.

"There is a limit to what I can do, but I will do everything I possibly can to reach that limit. I want to do my duty. That is why I am here. That is why this is my place in the world. I am certain of it," Rimi said.

"You have always been a strange woman with nothing on your mind but food," Shohi said with a bitter smile. "Cuisinology has done no wrong. Carry on with it. Let it grow under your guidance."

Rimi had crossed a sea, changed her name, and even abandoned her identity as a Wakokuan to live in the rear palace of Konkoku. To a more rational mind, it might have seemed like a preposterously lonely fate, but it did not bother Rimi at all. She had chosen this to be her place in the world, so it was. Cooking was her pillar. It didn't matter if she was Wakokuan or Konkoku. When it came to food, she was human. That was, after all, the fate of an Umashi-no-Miya.

Suddenly, she felt as if she could hear Lady Saigu's voice.

"All right. I will take over culinology for—" Rimi suddenly stopped, biting her tongue before saying Shusei's name. She instead just gave a fervent nod.

"I'm counting on you," Shohi said with a smile. His eyes had been dark since Shusei had revealed himself, but now Rimi could spy a slight gleam of joy.

Jotetsu, who had been anxiously watching their conversation from the corner of his eye, now gave a relaxed smile.

"Your Majesty," called Shu Kojin from the entrance of the culinology hall.

"Whoops," said Jotetsu, quickly straightening his posture.

The door to the culinology hall had been left open, and there on the other side of it was Shu Kojin, along with To Rihan and Jin Keiyu.

"Forgive my unannounced visit. I received word from an aide that you were here. I have a matter of some urgency," Kojin said.

Shohi's expression stiffened at his words.

"What is it? What sort of urgency?" Shohi asked.

"Ma Ijun requests an audience with you. He says he wishes to make a report."

“Ma Ijun? The merchant? I don’t usually allow merchants to see me,” Shohi said, furrowing his eyebrows.

“A fact we well know,” Keiyu said with a frown. “But as we believe this to be an exceptional circumstance, we have asked him to wait in the Hall of Enlightenment. Ijun is an important person in matters of diplomacy, and as Minister of Rites, I felt I could not outright reject his request.”

“I was the one who felt we should bring it to your attention,” Rihan chimed in. “There has been news of our regional administrators making some strange moves, and I believe Ijun’s request is related. It seems the Hero of the Countryside is at the center of things.”

“The Hero of the Countryside?” Shohi asked. He seemed confused at first, but he suddenly gasped. “You mean Administrator Kan Cho’un of An Prefecture?”

Rimi was alarmed by the grim expressions of the ministers and Shohi’s sudden shock.

“Master Jotetsu, who is this ‘Hero of the Countryside’?” she asked.

“Another name for the administrator of An. People say he’s a genius, and they claimed he could’ve been the youngest man to ever become a minister. But he wants to stay close to the people and work for their benefit, so he refuses to leave his position as regional administrator,” Jotetsu explained. “He’s basically a kook who lives in the middle of nowhere. He’s a hero to the people, so they call him ‘Hero of the Countryside.’”

At Kojin’s urging, Shohi left the culinology hall.

“So, what has this person done?” Rimi asked as she anxiously watched Shohi leave. “And Ma Ijun, isn’t that Pure Consort Yo’s birth-father?”

“Don’t ask me. But I wouldn’t worry about it. His Majesty has me. And of course, he’s got you too, right? You just focus on cooking up something tasty for him again,” Jotetsu said. He then gave Rimi a light knock on the head and followed after Shohi. He had told her not to worry, but it felt like there was another message as well: *Keep it together.*

That’s right, supper. That was why I came here in the first place.

The thought instantly brightened Rimi's mood. She was delighted by the idea of being able to do something.

I'll make him supper. That's what I can do for His Majesty!



With Kojin in the lead and Rihan and Keiyu following behind, the three led Shohi to the Hall of Enlightenment. Jotetsu trailed behind Shohi alongside Kyo Kunki, the imperial guardsman who had been assigned as the emperor's new bodyguard. Dissatisfaction with the situation was clearly written on the soldier's smooth, boiled-egg face.

"I don't care how much sway this merchant holds over the nation's finances, why would His Majesty meet directly with some tradesman? Even I had to wait two years to receive an audience with His Majesty," Kunki grumbled.

"Hey, come on," Jotetsu said, attempting to calm him down. "It's an unofficial meeting, and His Majesty is allowing it. If you've got a problem, take it up with the chancellor."

Kojin shot a wicked glance at Jotetsu, who awkwardly averted his gaze.

Come to think of it, I never did find out why Kojin dismissed Jotetsu, Shohi remembered as he looked at the two of them. He had been so relieved to see Rimi returned safely that he had forgotten to look into it. Then again, it didn't seem particularly necessary. Whatever the circumstances, Jotetsu had sworn to be Shohi's blade. That was enough.

Is Jotetsu the only one left by my side? he wondered. Jotetsu and Shusei had always been by his side. Now, with one of them gone, Shohi felt inconsolably miserable. And the question continued to plague him: why would Shusei betray him?

Perhaps it really is all about Rimi?

Shusei had said he desired Rimi. That he had always desired her. But for Shusei, *Shusei* of all people, to betray him for that reason alone? It was inconceivable. There had to be another reason. Yet as much as he thought and thought, he couldn't come up with one. And so, he returned to the original conclusion: perhaps it was because of Rimi.

Shusei was kind, compassionate, and had spent so much time with Shohi and Jotetsu. For him to destroy all of that, for him to cast everything aside, he must have been mad with desire for Rimi. He was the Loveless Scholar. Yet apparently he had found love, and it had driven him mad.

Once Shohi began thinking, the endless thoughts threatened to bury him. So, he shook his head to drive the accursed ideas away. He was not in a position to spend all his time worrying about Shusei.

Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu having turned up and suddenly insisting Shohi meet with Ma Ijun was proof enough that something unusual was afoot. And Rihan had spoken of the Hero of the Countryside. The administrator of An, the man they called hero, Kan Cho'un.

Shohi had never heard a good word about Cho'un from the officials in the capital. *Troublemaker. Obstinate. A demagogue who uses the people as an excuse to cause trouble.* Those were the only sorts of descriptions that ever reached the emperor's ears.

The Hall of Enlightenment was usually where petitioners would wait before an audience with the emperor, which would take place in the Hall of New Harmony. However, it was also used for emergency meetings with people who could not officially see the emperor. Behind the great double doors leading into the room was a long, narrow hall with lacquered, vermilion pillars on each side. At the end of the hallway, in the furthest part of the hall, was a series of partition screens that created simple, private rooms, each furnished with a single table.

"Thank you for waiting, Ma Ijun."

A man stood at the center of the spacious, stone-floored room. Upon Shohi's entrance, the man kneeled. Shohi passed alongside him and continued to a raised seat where he turned around and looked at the kneeling man once more.

So this is Ma Ijun, father of Pure Consort Yo.

The man was of average height and solidly built. His skin had a deep tan, and he seemed to be about the same age as Kojin.

"I am Emperor Ryu Shohi. Raise your head. I have been told you have

information that you wish to relay. Speak.”

“I am incredibly grateful that you would grant my request for an audience, Your Majesty,” Ijun said. As he lifted his head, Shohi took in his masculine, refined appearance with thick, bushy eyebrows. He could see in Ijun’s eyes strength and boldness, and a powerful, greedy confidence that could drive him onward forever.

It was he that had made Consort Yo come to detest all men. Shohi had been told Ijun wanted Consort So, who was no older than his daughter, for his wife. It hinted at his lust and his hunger for prestige.

“If it seems I forget myself by bringing you this news, it is only because I have no other way. Were I to speak of this to the administrator of An, where I live, I fear it would never see the light of day.”

“That sounds serious. What is going on?”

“The corruption of the provincial administrators is unbearable,” Ijun said.

Shohi frowned while Kunki and Jotetsu exchanged glances from behind him. Kojin and the two ministers’ expressions were blank beyond a seeming insistence to hear Ijun out.

The administrators were officials that were dispatched by the central government, under Shohi, in order to administer local rule. Once selected by the Ministry of Personnel, they would be sent out to serve as the governor of a prefecture. There, they would perform all manner of governmental and economic duties. They were responsible for keeping the peace, managing the economy, and collecting taxes, among other tasks. The taxes they collected created the funds the empire used to operate. They were also responsible for enforcing whatever laws the empire handed down.

If the central government was the mind of the empire, the administrators were its arms.

“They take the peoples’ tax money to line their own pockets. What’s worse, they impose bizarre fees on trade and demand exorbitant taxes from merchants,” Ijun stated. “It’s as if they are trying to obstruct the circulation of food and goods, driving up prices and forcing the people into poverty. At times,

they even use the prefectural soldiers for their own needs. If you need evidence, just look at how many now live in poverty in the provinces outside of the city.”

“Is this true, Rihan?” Shohi asked, looking at Rihan. As Minister of Revenue, he controlled matters of finance and local administration. If what Ijun said was true, Rihan would’ve heard about it.

“It is a fact that the taxes collected from the provincial areas have gradually dwindled since your ascension to the throne,” Rihan said. “Prices within the city seem to be rising, which appears to be the result of a lack of goods entering the city from the countryside. Our administrators regularly report that their finances suffer, but they say they do not know why.”

“‘They do not know why’ is not good enough,” Shohi said, seething at Rihan’s nonchalant attitude. “Why haven’t you ordered them to devise a plan to correct the situation? If our administrators are being lazy, then call them to the capital and reprimand them.”

“They have refused our summons, claiming they are too busy.”

“Then strip them of their position!”

“That would mean stripping all five prefectural administrators of their positions. If we do that, we would also have to strip the positions of the 72 township officials the administrators had the authority to appoint. It would be absolute chaos,” Rihan explained.

Shohi was disgusted. He felt like someone had doused him with freezing water.

“Is this a joke? All five prefectures are in financial trouble and our administrators refuse official summons? How long has this been going on?”

“It has been happening gradually, ever since your ascension to the throne,” Rihan said. “It has only grown noticeable in the last month. I was surprised as well, but the tally I reviewed yesterday shows that tax yields for the last month have been cut in half. It is utterly abnormal.”

“And why didn’t you inform me of this?”

“I have reported the decrease in tax revenue a number of times at our council meetings. However, the significant change over this past month has taken time to grasp, even in the Ministry of Revenue, so I was not able to report it to you in time. I myself only learned of things yesterday. Our understanding of the situation is still incomplete as well.”

That’s right... Was that the sign, then?

Shohi recalled Rihan gravely informing him that the cause was unknown and an investigation was ongoing. The emperor, meanwhile, had shrugged it off.

The cause will eventually come to light and it will be handled then, he’d said. In the hundred-year history of the Konkoku Empire, taxes have risen and fallen any number of times, yet the empire has remained stable. Shohi had simply assumed that would continue.

But if Shusei’s betrayal had taught Shohi anything, it was that no peace of mind, no stability, is ever absolute. Shohi suddenly felt a great unease bubbling up inside of him.

“The reason for the desperate financial situation is the tyranny of the administrators,” Ijun said in a low voice, cutting right to the heart of the matter. “As the Minister of Revenue says, the local economy has been in chaos for the last month. If I may offer my opinion as a merchant, it is unprecedented.”

Ijun looked up at Shohi.

“Your Majesty, I do not understand the nuances of government,” he continued. “I have no interest in it. I am, after all, a merchant. Under normal circumstances, there should be no reason for you to grant me an audience. But it is because I am a merchant that I am worried about the struggling economy. I made the insolent decision of requesting to meet you because it is the government that is making trade suffer. I ask you to save us. You are the only one who can.”

“We have yet to confirm if these financial struggles are due to the corruption of our administrators or if it is simple economic chaos,” Rihan added. “What worries me is Kan Cho’un. He is at the center of a flurry of communication between the administrators. They refuse our summons yet manage to meet each other frequently. If what Ijun says is true, they may be colluding for some

purpose.”

As Shohi listened to Rihan, his head began to ache as if it were being squeezed.

“We must take action,” Kojin added. “History shows that nothing good comes from local officials colluding and ignoring the central government.”

Shohi clenched his eyelids shut. His headache was growing worse. When provincial authorities ignored the central government and showed signs of collusion, it meant something was about to happen. History had shown it time and again.

“Are the provinces going to rebel?” Kunki whispered nervously from behind.

Shohi felt a shiver run down his spine.

Chapter 2: Bewilderment from the Other Side

I

The embers of civil war, smoldering painfully out of reach. And when that ember sparks and explodes into flames, it spreads wildly, consuming the emperor in flames.

Is that what this spark will lead to?! Shohi wondered, his eyes clenched tightly closed. The darkness around him seemed to undulate. His body quaked violently.

Just as he thought he couldn't take any more, he felt someone reach out and hold him upright. Shohi's eyes snapped open to find Jotetsu holding him by the shoulder. *Calm down*, his eyes seemed to say.

"Watch your step, Your Majesty," Jotetsu whispered in a reassuring voice. Beneath that, however, were reprimands. *Keep it together. Maintain your dignity.*

Shohi, hoping Ijun wouldn't notice his stumble, knocked Jotetsu's hand away and straightened up.

I am an emperor, Shohi thought. He tensed his stomach and stared straight at Ijun.

"I understand the situation, Ma Ijun. I have heard your piece. I will confirm the details, confer with my chancellor and ministers, and deal with the matter."

Ma Ijun bowed his head deeply.

I am an emperor.

He repeated the words in his mind, but his mind's voice was weak. Shusei was gone. Rebellion seemed to be smoldering in the provinces. It threatened to shatter all faith he had in himself.



Rimi heard the sound of someone's clothes shuffling across the ground.

His Majesty is back!

At the sound of Shohi's return to his living room, Rimi stood up from her seat. It was not long before he entered the room, but neither Jotetsu nor Kunki were with him. It was one of the rare times he was alone.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty," Rimi said. Shohi's eyes grew wide at the sight of her beaming smile.

"Rimi?! Why haven't you returned to the Palace of the Water Spirit?!"

Shohi's apparent shock left Rimi feeling even more bewildered than he did.

"What? 'Why?' I just thought this was the perfect opportunity to make you supper."

"*Supper?* Food? You never change..." Shohi mumbled. It seemed as if the life had gone out of him.

Oh no! Is he fed up with me?! He said something like that before too, that I'm a strange woman who thinks about nothing but food! Rimi was in a panic, wondering if something had gone wrong.

"Th-That's true. I'm sorry. It's all I can ever think about. I can't help myself!" Rimi said.

After Shohi had left with Kojin, Rimi had cooked him supper in the kitchen and waited for Shohi's return in the living room. Jotetsu had suggested she "cook him up something tasty," which had gotten her so excited that she had ended up overdoing it. Rimi had only wanted to help.

She had prepared him a thick, tasty tang called changguatang, made with minced chicken and winter melon. She hadn't managed to find any ingredients with cuisinological properties. But at the very least, Shohi would be tired, so she hoped to serve him something to put him at ease. She hadn't been sure how long it would be before his return, so she chose something that would be tasty even if it got cold. In fact, it would taste even more gentle and inviting at room temperature.

Maybe this was all just self-serving! His Majesty must be tired, so he might

want to be alone! Oh! That must be why he isn't with Master Jotetsu!

As she realized that, Rimi worked herself into a state of embarrassment. She rushed to the table and snatched up the covered bowl containing the tang.

"I will excuse myself immediately. I'll return to the Palace of the Water—"

Rimi gasped as she was suddenly cut short. Shohi had grabbed her tightly from behind.

"You're fine. Don't leave," he said.

Rimi's breath caught in her throat. She could feel his warmth against her back, which made her flush with embarrassment.

"The Nocturnal Liturgy should've been tonight. We can't have the Nocturnal Liturgy, but I can have you here with me. That's all I need," Shohi said. "I am happy," he added after a moment, seemingly embarrassed. Rimi felt a warmth in her breast at the words, like a little flame had flared in her heart. Was it love? But she loved Shusei, and this felt somehow different. If she had to define it, it was like the love one felt when they were able to smile at a child and hug them tight.

Rimi reached up and gently touched his arms.

"Will you be having your tang?" she asked.

"I will," he said, his tone docile. He didn't say another word as he pulled away from Rimi and sat at the table. Perhaps he wanted to hide his embarrassment.

Rimi poured some changguatang into a bowl and offered it to Shohi. He raised a spoonful to his mouth and gave a deep, relieved sigh as he ate.

"I can feel the winter melon melt in my mouth. It's delicious. The consistency and the light saltiness go perfectly together. Is that ginger and green onion? The aroma really adds to the flavor."

The tension surrounding Shohi unraveled. There was something instinctual about food. Humans were just another sort of animal, after all, and a full belly naturally eased the mind. That was enough to give Rimi's place here meaning.

After a bowl of tang, Shohi moved to the sofa and eased himself into the seat. Rimi went to collect the utensils so she could return them to the kitchen, but

she was surprised to see an attendant appear to gather them as if he'd been waiting.

I see. Of course, His Majesty's attendants monitor every aspect of his life.

It seemed a very cramped existence, but perhaps that was what it meant to be emperor.

"Where did Master Jotetsu go off to?" Rimi asked.

"He said he had someone to meet." Shohi's eyes began to droop as he answered.

"Perhaps you should rest? I can return to the Palace of the Water Spirit."

"I already told you. Don't leave," he said. The mention of her leaving had suddenly caused his eyes to snap open, and his voice grew clear and sharp. "I am not asking to have a mock Nocturnal Liturgy. I just want you by my side for tonight. Come, sit here."

Shohi glanced at the place beside him. Rimi hesitantly took a seat on the sofa. It seemed he wanted her to comfort him.

"Did something happen?" Rimi inquired gingerly.

"It is not just the Ho House, it turns out. According to Ma Ijun's appeal, the provincial administrators are behaving strangely. Kan Cho'un lies at the center of things, and it could even spell rebellion."

Shohi spat a scornful laugh, making Rimi gasp. He gently closed his eyes, still sitting upright. It was like he was so tired that he could no longer keep his eyes open.

"Kojin has summoned Kan Cho'un to the capital, but the man refuses to come," Shohi continued. "Rihan has ordered a thorough investigation into the financial state of the provinces, but he has had difficulty gathering information about matters. And if the administrators are covering things up, well... Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu will be arriving early tomorrow. We'll have to have another conference."

Shohi spoke in a low murmur as if he was talking more to himself than Rimi. The strength had drained out of him. He nodded once, twice, and then slowly

listed to the side, coming to lean on Rimi's shoulder. A moment later, he toppled entirely, bringing his head to rest in Rimi's lap.

What shocked Rimi wasn't Shohi's head in her lap but how desperately tired he seemed.

If all that's true, then of course he would be exhausted.

Rebellion. The word was heavy with danger.

Shohi's breath grew deeper as he slept in her lap, and his mouth began to hang open just a bit. He looked so innocent. As Rimi watched him sleep, he seemed like a younger boy. She gave his head a gentle, tentative stroke. The worse one's troubles grew, the harder it was to sleep. Right now, she wanted him to sleep deeply and peacefully.

That's right! I'm sure there was an ingredient that lets you fall asleep faster and sleep more restfully.

Rimi had seen something like that while looking through notes in the cuisinology hall. The root of the lullaby lily was said to calm the nerves and give restful sleep. The roots grew largest in late spring, and the best time to gather them was during the three days surrounding a seasonal festival known as Spring's Returnal.

Gisan neighbored Roko, one of the townships of Annei. It wasn't too far from the city.

This is perfect. Tomorrow is the first day of Spring's Returnal. I should try going to Gisan. I hope I can find some lullaby lilies to offer His Majesty.

She kept stroking Shohi's head, and a smile naturally sprung forth from her.

You know... He really is precious.



In truth, Shohi had awoken the moment Rimi had touched his head, but it appeared she believed the young emperor was still asleep. She continued to gently stroke his head. It was as if he was sleeping on her lap.

Is she treating me as if I'm a child right now? Shohi felt faintly annoyed by the idea but being treated like a child felt so *nice* that he didn't open his eyes. He had never gotten to experience the feeling of being caressed as he slept, having spent his whole childhood dreaming of how happy he would be if only he could experience this very moment. Shohi couldn't even remember his mother En hugging him, much less stroking his head so lovingly.

This is so nice.

Shohi let himself sink into bliss and drift off to sleep once more.

This was what he'd always been looking for. He had longed for this kindness. A sense of relief enveloped Shohi. He wondered why a palace woman smiling and asking him to eat up could have such an effect on him. As his mind drifted, he vacantly pondered his feelings.

Mother? Mother?

No matter how much he had cried for her from his bed, nobody had ever come. But now, it felt like all that pain and loneliness was melting away beneath Rimi's kind touch.



Gravel crunched beneath Shusei's feet as he dismounted from the carriage outside the Ho House's inner gate.

The area surrounding the inner gate was illuminated with braziers, but the gravel road leading back to the outer gate was quickly swallowed up by darkness. Looking into that darkness, into the places the light didn't reach, made Shusei pause.

"I'm going to enjoy the night air for a bit. I'll be along soon," Shusei said to Neison, who was already heading for the inner gate.

As the carriage rolled away, heading for the rear of the estate, Shusei was left alone in front of the charming, arched gateway. The doors were relatively small

but ornamented with extravagant colored relief carvings worthy of royalty.

The grounds were expansive. To reach the main building where Neison lived, one had to pass through two gates. Furthermore, the main hall was connected to a number of other buildings and storehouses via corridors. It was almost palatial.

“What do you want, Jotetsu? Have you come to kill me?” Shusei called out. Jotetsu stepped out from the darkness, carrying himself like a silent creature of the night.

“I would never!” Jotetsu said with a grin. “I just thought I should come to pay proper respects to the new head of the Ho House. That, and I wanted to let you know how His Majesty is doing.”

“There’s really no need for that,” Shusei said with an unreadable expression. “I can imagine. Panic? Agitation? Rage?”

“You’re off the mark. He’s just sad. Can’t even bring himself to hate you, I guess. It’s not too late, Shusei. You can still go back to how things were. His Majesty will forgive you. Rimi’s sad too. But you, you’re still—”

“Jotetsu, if that was all it took to stop me, I never would have done this to begin with,” Shusei said coldly. Jotetsu was nearly glaring at him.

“You know something, Shusei?” Jotetsu asked. “His Majesty still hasn’t demanded to know what my relationship is with Shu Kojin. It’s like he doesn’t even think it’s important. That’s how much he trusts me. He can live without asking those questions. Isn’t that kind of fearlessness worthy of an emperor?” He suddenly smiled at Shusei.

“If only that were true.”

“Well, I believe it’s true. I’ve decided he’s the man I’ll serve for the rest of my life. And at some point, His Majesty isn’t going to be able to stay quiet anymore,” Jotetsu shared. “He might order me to kill you. If he does, I’m not gonna have a choice in the matter. But you’re just going to keep going, huh?”

“I am prepared for whatever may come. But do not expect me to die before I’ve accomplished my ambition.”

“Your ‘ambition’ doesn’t have a thing to do with it,” Jotetsu said. “The order will come when it comes. Who knows when that could be?”

“Well, I’ll just have to do my best to keep from being killed. Whenever that may be,” Shusei said. He turned his back on Jotetsu, signaling an end to the conversation, and walked toward the gate.

“You’re a damn fool,” were Jotetsu’s only words as he disappeared into the darkness.

Shusei breathed a small sigh and headed in the direction of the lights adorning the main hall. He suddenly felt deeply aware of how tired he was. A certain degree of tension was necessary, but the extreme weariness could dull his thinking. He needed to catch his breath and keep a close eye on his own fatigue.



The township of Gisan, in An Prefecture, was less than a day away from the city of Annei. The small number of villages in the area meant there was equally little cultivation in the area. There was a natural abundance of untouched hills and valleys. Noblewomen would occasionally come to the area to enjoy a carefree walk.

“This is an excellent place for a walk. The hillsides are covered in spring grass, and I recall the lullaby lilies you seek growing around here, Lady Rimi.”

Kyo Kunki, junior officer of the imperial guards and imperially appointed bodyguard to the emperor, led Rimi along a narrow road that snaked its way through gently sloping grasslands.

“Wow, you know so much, Master Kunki!” Rimi said.

“My mother often comes to walk in Gisan, and I was ordered to accompany her when I had no other duties,” Kunki explained. “However, since becoming His Majesty’s bodyguard, I’ve decided I will no longer be accompanying her. My duty is to protect His Majesty, and I find it annoying to escort anyone else.”

Kunki seemed to get flustered when he realized what he’d just said.

“Of course, I am not annoyed to escort you, Lady Rimi! It was His Majesty’s order!” Kunki added in a panic.

Master Kunki makes me think of a big, shiny, polished egg, Rimi thought as she giggled at his overly serious manner.

Rimi had come to Gisan in search of lullaby lilies, an ingredient for Shohi's supper.

It was still early in the morning. Rimi had been in the Palace of the Water Spirit, preparing for her trip to Gisan, when Kunki was suddenly dispatched to the palace. Rimi's every movement was apparently being monitored and reported to Shohi. With I Bunryo apprehended, the attempts on Rimi's life had ended. Shohi, however, was still extremely worried and ordered Kunki to escort Rimi on her excursion.

Wind blew down from the mountainside, and the grass looked like waves as it rustled beneath it.

Seemingly thrilled by the vast open sky and the aroma of spring grass, Tama leaped from Rimi's arms. She was like a little silver bolt flying against the wind, and she dashed right by Kunki. She had gone some distance when she suddenly stopped and raised her head, sniffing at the wind as it rustled her fine, silver fur. The pearls clutched in her front-right paw glinted in the light.

"That strange mouse is quite fast, isn't it?" Kunki said. He still believed Tama was a mouse. Rimi thought it was entirely inappropriate to treat the divine Quinary Dragon, guardian of Konkoku, like a mouse. But then again, Rimi had been the one to call it a mouse in the first place, so she wasn't in a place to criticize.

Beyond the open fields was a range of tall mountains and deep valleys. Rimi was worried Tama would run off and get lost. Despite her fears, however, Tama simply frolicked through the field, bouncing and racing in circles in apparent delight. With no need to worry about Tama running too far away, Rimi and Kunki began their search for lullaby lilies.

The plants had small white flowers, and since they would very soon be blooming, it was a perfect time to hunt for the delicate, white buds. However, no matter how much they searched, they were unable to find any. The pair pushed deeper and deeper into the field and eventually wandered into a nearby forest. Tama followed along as they moved, always playing somewhere in the

vicinity. Kunki looked troubled as he watched Tama leap from branch to branch out of the corner of his eye.

“This is odd...” he said. “There are no lullaby lilies anywhere. This is not how I remember it. Some were present around the roots of the trees here. I’m also starting to worry about those clouds.”

Rimi looked up. The sky through the branches had, at some point, been blotted out by heavy, black clouds. A raindrop splashed on her nose.

“Oh. It’s raining, Master Kunki,” Rimi said.

“This isn’t good. I know we haven’t found any lilies, but we need to return to the carriage.”

In the short period they were talking, the light had grown dim. Rimi could hear the patter of raindrops against the leaves above them. Tama seemed surprised by the sudden turn in the weather as well and was crossing the branches to make her way back to Rimi.

“Come on, Tama! Let’s hurry back!” Rimi called and held her arm up. Tama squeaked and was about to leap to her from a nearby branch. However, as if called by something, she suddenly froze and looked back over her shoulder.

“What’s wrong?”

Tama’s fur stirred as she stared behind her with her big blue eyes. Rimi barely had a chance to wonder what Tama was doing before the dragon changed direction and darted back deeper into the forest.

“Tama?!”

II

Tama had, in the blink of an eye, disappeared into the darkened depths of the forest. Rimi chased after the little silver dragon in a panic. With the dark and the rain, Rimi feared that if she lost sight of Tama, she’d never find her again. Tama was the Quinary Dragon, protector of Konkoku. The idea of losing the Quinary Dragon terrified her.

Kunki was equally panicked as he chased after Rimi.

“Lady Rimi!” he called. “You can look for your mouse later! We need to get back to the carriage!”

“No! I can’t leave Tama!”

“Lady Rimi!”

The rain kept getting stronger until soon it was almost frenzied. Its pounding even made it difficult to breathe. But even through the darkness and sheets of rain, Tama’s little silver form seemed to shine and stay visible. Somehow, Rimi could clearly make her out, so she did not give up the chase.

Kunki seemed to be chasing after her, but his voice and footsteps were quickly drowned out by the sound of rainfall. He may have even lost sight of her.

As the rain pounded, Rimi’s sodden ruqun began to cling to her body and her skirt twined around her legs. Her jade hairpin fell from her soaking hair, but she didn’t care.

“Tama! Wait!” Rimi cried as loudly as she could manage, but Tama just ran farther and farther away.

What’s wrong, Tama?! What is it?!

Rimi stared hard through the curtains of rain. She couldn’t afford to lose sight of Tama. And then, suddenly, Tama stopped before a slender, shadowy figure.

She stopped!

“Tama!” she managed to cry out between gasps.

As Rimi watched, the shadowy shape before Tama stooped down, reached out its arms, and bundled her up.

That’s a person?! Rimi realized. Her breath was ragged and her legs were unsteady, and she suddenly pitched forward into the mud. The splash must have alerted the person to her presence because they began to approach.

“Rimi?”

The voice was almost inaudible beneath the roar of the rain, but Rimi would know that kind voice anywhere. Still on her hands and knees in the muck, she

looked up in shock. She was dumbfounded to see who was looking down at her.

Was it a hallucination? Had her doubts and fears been given form? Her frustrated desire to see him, to ask him why?

“Master Shusei?”

There he was, right before her. He wore a slim, easy-to-move-in top with a pair of ku, wide-legged trousers, and leather boots, along with a cloak to protect him from the rain. It wasn't the attire Rimi was used to seeing him in, but the man holding Tama in the rain was unmistakably Shusei.

“What are you doing here?” Shusei asked in surprise. Rimi was too stunned to come up with any sort of response. Her palms ached, scraped by her fall. Her breath burned from sprinting. More than that, though, was the immense bubble of emotion in her chest. She wasn't sure if it was shock or joy, but it made it impossible to speak. Instead, tears welled in her eyes, and the teardrops and raindrops washed the splattered mud from her face.

Shusei was the first to regain his composure. He dashed over to Rimi, knelt beside her, and draped his cloak over her head and shoulders.

“Can you stand?” he asked. “I don't know what's happening, but first we need to get out of here. Let us find somewhere to shelter from the rain, at least.”

Shusei held Rimi's shoulder as he helped her to her feet. As she stood, pain suddenly lanced through her right ankle, and she lurched forward.

“Your ankle seems to be injured,” Shusei said.

“I'm all right. Just let me lean on you,” Rimi said.

“We can't have you walking around in the rain like this,” Shusei said. He then lifted Rimi into his arms. Tama scampered down from Shusei's shoulder to huddle on her chest. Rimi looked up at him while raindrops spattered on her face.

“I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to do this,” she said.

“I don't mind. I can hardly leave you like this,” he said.

“Master Shusei, why are you here?”

"I could ask you the same thing. But first, we need to find somewhere to collect ourselves. Just bear with me until then."

Thunder boomed above the trees like the deep roar of an angry beast. The rainfall grew ever more violent. Shusei set off quickly.

"The path to town is muddy. It would be dangerous to try to go back down. Perhaps we can find a hollow tree or a cave," he mumbled. Raindrops traced his jaw as he spoke. His expression was grave as they moved through the rain-swept forest, but suddenly his look changed.

"I see light," Shusei said.

A little farther ahead, the forest suddenly stopped in the face of a rock wall. The wall had an uneven texture as if layers of vertical grooves had been chiseled into the surface of it. Three buildings, which seemed to be shrines to the gods, were huddled against the cliff face.

A dancing heavenly immortal was pictured on the double doors of the central building, and metal dragons adorned the building's curved eaves. It was almost certainly a shrine to the gods. The buildings flanking the central one were much simpler. Perhaps they were sleeping quarters for the priests or custodians. The right-hand building's door was slightly ajar, and light trickled out of it.

"Maybe a priest is staying there. We're in luck. Perhaps they'll let us wait out the rain," Shusei said. His expression brightened a bit as he hurried toward the shrine. When they had made it under the eaves, Shusei set Rimi down and supported her unsteady body. Tama slipped her way inside Rimi's skirt.

"Excuse me!" Shusei called out. "We were suddenly caught in the rain, and we were wondering if we might shelter here until it passes!"

After a bit of movement from within, the door swung wide open. Inside was a young man of perhaps twenty-five. He wore a dark-colored shenyi that didn't look at all like a priest's attire. The man was gaunt, his face pale, and his eyes seemed locked in a dreadful glare.

"You?" Shusei mumbled in shock. The man didn't seem to notice Shusei's response.

"What do you two want?" he said, his tone tinged with suspicion. He looked

Shusei and Rimi up and down and furrowed his eyebrows. “The girl looks like somebody of status. And despite how you’re dressed, your hands are soft. I doubt you’re her attendant.”

“As you guessed, she is indeed a woman of status,” Shusei said with a business-like tone as he wiped the shock from his face. “She came here on an outing but was caught in the rain and was separated from her attendant. The road is too muddy for her to return to her carriage, and it would be dangerous for her to walk around carelessly. We were hoping we might shelter here from the rain.”

“We get those occasionally. Girls with flowers for brains waltzing into the mountains with dreams of flower fields. And then the bees sting, the snakes bite, the rain falls, and they learn what reality is.”

“I haven’t even explained the situation. Don’t you feel you’re being a bit rude?” Shusei said, seemingly irked by the man’s words. Rimi was still too stunned to be angry. She’d been suddenly caught in the rain and ran into Shusei. A sense of reality had not yet settled in for her.

Flowers? Oh, he must mean foolish, empty-headed people. Well, I certainly must seem foolish to be out in the rain in a ruqun.

Rimi stared at the ghoulish man, and he looked back at her, furrowing his brows even more. It seemed like his expression was a permanent glower.

“You can hear me, can’t you? What? Nothing to say for yourself?” he said.

“Oh, um, yes. I can. I was just thinking how foolish I must seem,” she said.

“Well well, a bit of self-awareness, eh? Good,” he said. The man slipped out of the way and opened the door wider. “I don’t see any reason to deny you shelter. This is a shrine. I’m no priest, though. I don’t have a suitable place to stay, so the gods are renting me a room. Come in.”

The grumpy-looking man turned out to be surprisingly kind. He led Rimi and Shusei to the left-side building and told them to use it as they saw fit. He also brought dry towels, robes for them to change into, and even a candle.

The man never gave his name. As Rimi and Shusei had not made their own positions clear, perhaps it was a form of consideration. A way to co-exist

without bringing up their identities.

But just who is he?

The man lived in a temple but didn't seem to be the priest in charge of it. How had he ended up here? What was he doing here? He wasn't particularly well dressed, but his eyes and mannerisms hinted at his intelligence. Could he be an out-of-work scholar, perhaps?

While it was likely around sunset, the heavy rain clouds made it seem more like nighttime.

The square building was almost entirely empty. Their room only contained a sofa and a bed up against the wall. They were already wet and chilly, and the cold stone floor drained even more warmth from their bodies. Chilly drops of water slid down Rimi's face, running along her jaw and onto her chest.

I hope Master Kunki was able to get back to the carriage or the village safely. I know I had to follow Tama, but I've been a terrible burden on Master Kunki.

Kunki was a warrior, and without Rimi weighing him down, he would likely be able to take care of himself. Still, he must have been terribly worried about her.

Shusei, who had helped Rimi inside, brought her over to the bed and handed her a towel and a robe.

"Dry yourself and get changed," he said. "I'll get changed as well. We'll fall sick at this rate."

"But..." Rimi mumbled, blushing. Because the room was so barren, there was nowhere to change in private. Shusei, also apparently embarrassed, averted his eyes.

"I'll turn away. Make sure you don't look this way either," he said and moved into the darkness where the candlelight didn't reach.

I'm wet and freezing. I certainly can't stay like this, Rimi thought. She let down her hair and undid the sash of her ruqun, then braced herself against the bed and removed her skirt.

Tama emerged from beneath the sodden cloth of Rimi's skirt and gave herself a brisk shake to get the water off her fur. She clambered up to a beam near the

ceiling, gave a little yawn, and then curled up in a ball to sleep.

Why did you run off like that, Tama?

They had just been about to head back to the carriage, but it was as if Tama had noticed something and ran off. And when Rimi had chased after her, she had happened to run into Shusei.

Now that I think about it, Master Shusei was holding her.

Rimi was fairly certain it was the first time she'd ever seen another person hold Tama. Could it be that Tama had sensed Shusei and went running to him? Rimi turned to look at Shusei. She could see his back in the darkness. A bit of water glistened on the back of his neck. The shape of his shoulders and his smooth naked back gave him a young, masculine appeal.

Rimi suddenly looked away. She could feel her ears burning bright red.

That's right. Why is he also in Gisan?

She caught sight of a bag sitting by the door. It looked like the linen sack that Shusei had been wearing on his hip, and she could see little white flowers peeking out of it. Lullaby lilies. Kunki had recalled them growing in the area, but neither he nor Rimi had been able to find a single one. Shusei must have been a step ahead of them, gathering them first.

If Master Shusei is collecting lullaby lilies, does that mean he's still pursuing cuisinology on his own? He hasn't changed. He hasn't given up cuisinology.

Even as the head of the Ho House, his feelings toward cuisinology hadn't changed. Shusei hadn't changed. Rimi felt like the lilies were proof of that, and her heart soared at the thought.

Didn't that mean he had his own plans and just made it look like he'd betrayed Shohi? Didn't it mean he was still loyal to the emperor?

"Master Shusei, won't you tell me the truth?" Rimi asked with her gaze turned away from him. She was seated on the bed in her fresh robe. He too had finished changing and emerged from the darkness. He stopped a distance away from Rimi.

"The truth?" he said.

“Kyo Kunki and I came here together to look for lullaby lilies. I wanted to find something that would let me both continue pursuing cuisinology and prepare supper for His Majesty,” Rimi said. She looked expectantly at the flowers poking out of the linen sack.

“I see. So that’s why our paths crossed here.”

“You came here looking for lullaby lilies too, right? Meaning you haven’t given up on cuisinology?”

“Where are you going with this?” he asked.

“You haven’t changed, Master Shusei. You’re still pursuing cuisinology. I can’t imagine you rebelling against His Majesty, so I feel like you have some sort of reason to act like you’re—”

“Rimi,” Shusei said, cutting her off. He had a pained smile. “Your outlook is as adorable as ever. Or to put it another way, as you yourself said—you are being foolish.”

III

“What?” Rimi said. Not expecting that sort of reply from Shusei, she blinked repeatedly in surprise. The rain continued pounding on the roof above them.

“You think that my continuing with cuisinology means I haven’t changed? Humans aren’t so simplistic, Rimi. Cuisinology is what I enjoy doing. If someone enjoyed reading since they were a child, does that mean they haven’t changed in adulthood? Of course not.” His tone was as kind as ever, even when lecturing her.

“For twenty years, I have been a pawn in Shu Kojin’s schemes,” he continued. “I believed my purpose was to serve His Majesty. But when I learned the truth of my birth and realized how long I’d been played for a fool, it all became meaningless. Were my duties as the cuisinologist and the grand councilor nothing more than a result of Kojin’s machinations? When I started to question that, nothing was certain anymore. And so, I decided I would make things certain.”

The sound of rain was fierce enough to drown out Shusei’s voice, yet Rimi

heard every word. His face was clear in the flickering candlelight. His smile was sad and frustrated.

“I realized there was only one way to enjoy the fate that had been assigned to me,” Shusei continued. “I needed to take up this other life that Shu Kojin had stolen away. If I do that, perhaps I can erase this hollowness I feel.”

“I see. And by ‘other life,’ you mean as the son of Ho Seishu? With other people dictating to you that it’s your duty to be on the throne?” Rimi’s voice was shaking as she spoke.

“I will do what is desired of me as the child of Ho Seishu. That is all I will say,” Shusei replied. His tone was matter-of-fact, and these were presumably his true feelings.

Even hearing it directly from his own mouth, Rimi couldn’t fully believe it. Maybe these were more lies? Maybe his true intention was something else?

“Did I make the wrong decision? Is that why you’re doing this?” she asked.

“By decision, you mean your choice to become empress? That has nothing to do with it.”

“B-but I...before...His Majesty, you said you wanted...” Rimi looked down, stumbling over her words.

“That was just a provocation,” Shusei said while wearing a bitter smile. “A little greeting from the master of the Ho House to the emperor of Ryu.”

The sky above boomed as lightning ripped through the air.

“Just as you have purged yourself of your feelings for me, I have wiped away my feelings for you,” he continued. “I do not desire you now, and I do not want you for my own. More than anything, I want to fill this emptiness I feel toward life with something new. That is all. Your decision has nothing to do with it.”

They had promised that they would kill their feelings for each other, and Rimi had pretended to have done just that.

But Shusei really did kill his feelings for me. He didn’t just pretend, Rimi thought. *That’s good. It means we’ve kept our vows,* another, smaller part of her thought. Yet even as she had that thought, tears unexpectedly filled her

eyes. She feared she'd have no answer if Shusei asked why she was crying, so she turned her face away from him. Her loose hair covered her face.

"These things don't concern you. Just do your duty and protect your place in the world," Shusei said.

He turned his gaze to the darkened ceiling as if worried about the fearsome rain.

"It doesn't seem like the weather will relent any time soon. Take the bed and get some rest. I'm tired too. I'll take the sofa," Shusei stated.

Rimi, still looking away, nodded and curled up on the bed.

She had feared she'd made the wrong choice. That she'd driven Shusei to betray Shohi. Then she'd begun to wonder if he was just pretending that he'd betrayed the emperor. She'd hoped for it. Those fears and hopes had made her want to see Shusei. She'd wanted him to lay everything out clearly.

And now, unexpectedly, he was here, right in front of her, having revealed his thinking to her.

He's certainly made things clear. I've been so foolish, about everything.

Shusei had snuffed out his feelings for Rimi. He wasn't pretending at all but instead taking control of his destiny.

He really has changed. The old Shusei is gone. The Shusei I understood, who understood me, is gone.

Her heart called out for him again and again. Tears fell from her eyes, one after another, as she did. Tears of sadness for how he'd changed. Tears of pain for the loss of the kind, gentle man who'd chosen Shohi's side as his place, right near Rimi.

Curled in a ball and with her eyes shut tight, all Rimi could feel was the warmth of the tears that streamed down her cheeks.

Shusei must have snuffed the candle soon after that because darkness enveloped her.

The rain continued to fall.



Shusei's clothes were not yet dry, but they were tolerable. He changed into the outfit that he had been wearing the day before. Peering through the crack of the open door to see how things looked outside, he saw that the eastern sky was tinged with the light purple of early dawn. The rain had stopped, and now only a cold, wet wind blew.

I need to get down from the mountain and let Kyo Kunki know what happened. There's a possibility he spent the whole night looking for Rimi in the middle of a storm.

The young, overly serious officer was likely blaming himself for losing Rimi, perhaps even to the point of doing something to harm himself.

The faint morning light trickling through the crack in the door fell near the bed where Rimi slept. Shusei approached the bed and gazed at her sleeping face. She must have cried herself to sleep, evident by the trails of tears glistening on her cheeks. His heart ached at the sight.

"Forgive me, Rimi."

If he'd told her that his decision had been heavily influenced by hers, it would clearly only compound her suffering. Surely hurting her now, like this, was a far kinder act.

Shusei had been in agony, wondering why Rimi would suddenly announce she would become empress. But when he recovered himself, it was simple to guess her reasoning. Rimi knew the truth about Shusei's birth. She had done it *for* him. After he had made the realization, he'd made his own choice.

"You are still unbearably adorable," he whispered as he kneeled beside her. He lifted some of her hair that drooped from the bed and kissed it. He then stood and turned to leave, only to find the Quinary Dragon sitting quietly in the doorway. It gazed at Shusei with its big blue eyes.



“You see right through me, don’t you, Quinary Dragon? I leave Rimi in your care.”

The dragon swayed its beautiful, silvery tail, rustled its fur, and blinked a few times.

Shusei picked up the linen bag filled with the lullaby lilies he’d gathered, but after a moment’s reflection, set it back down on the stone floor. He picked up the extinguished candle instead and wrote a message on the floor in front of it with candle wax. He then gave the Quinary Dragon a little pat on the head and headed outside.

Shusei had intended to go see the man from the night before, but as he rounded the main temple building, he found him standing right there under the building’s eaves, watching the awakening eastern sky.

It felt as if the rain had cleansed the air. The colors in the sky were bright, and the wind was brisk and clean.

“Good morning. I wanted to thank you for your hospitality last night,” Shusei said.

“Sleep well?” he responded without turning his eyes from the sky.

“I’m afraid not. But the one I was with is still sound asleep. I’ll be sending someone to claim her soon, so I’ll leave her here until then. I imagine I don’t need to say this, but I ask you not to do anything untoward. She’s under the protection of a divine dragon.”

“I’m not interested anyway,” he said.

“No, I imagine not,” Shusei said.

“What? Why the hell not? I’m a man too, aren’t I?”

“Because you aren’t the sort of man to do something so inexcusable.”

The man narrowed his eyes. They shone with a keen light.

“You’re saying you came here knowing who I am?” he said.

“I’ve seen you before,” Shusei said. “It was some years ago, on the day of your inauguration. So yes, I know who you are. Our meeting here, however, is just a

coincidence. I was surprised to see you here. I never guessed you'd be living in a temple of all places."

"And who the hell are you supposed to be?"

"You have not given your name, so neither will I," Shusei said with a smile.

Shusei left the man and headed down the mountain. Sure enough, Kunki had created a panic in the village at the base of the mountain. After losing Rimi, he had intended to return to Annei to request aid. However, the torrential rain had flooded the river and left the road impassable. He'd then turned to the villagers to try and create a search party, but the awful weather meant that could've turned the situation from bad to worse. The villagers had managed to pacify the man, and the search had apparently been put off until dawn. As soon as the storm abated, Kunki rushed off to gather the villagers to search the mountain.

Shusei managed to catch one of the villagers rushing around preparing for the search and let him know where Rimi was.

That ought to get Kunki up to the temple in no time, he thought.

Shusei reclaimed the horse he'd left in the village and slipped away, hoping to keep Kunki from spotting him. The river that had blocked the road to Annei had since receded, allowing Shusei to arrive back at the Ho estate without issue. After a hot bath, Shusei changed his clothes and fixed his hair.

He had gone to Gisan in hopes of improving his mood. He had already been thinking of researching ways to store lullaby lilies, and with Spring's Return beginning, he thought he would go collect some. It was a three-day festival, which meant he'd only had a one-in-three chance of bumping into Rimi.

Shusei wasn't sure if he'd been lucky or unlucky.

With his attire in order, Shusei went to the main hall to give Neison his morning greeting. As he walked along the pathway that looped around the main hall, he saw someone heading his way. Shusei was shocked by the sight and paused for a moment.

Who is that?

It was a man wearing a white shenyi with silver embroidery around the neck.

On his face was an odd, white mask. It had a thin mouth and eyes carved out, giving it gaps in the appearance of a smile, and a number of red stripes were painted on the cheeks.

The masked man appeared to notice Shusei as well, for his head jolted just a bit. His gait remained fluid, however, and he approached without hesitation.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Master of the Ho House. I am a close associate of your predecessor, Ho Neison,” he said. Behind the mask, the voice was too muffled to tell whether he was young or old.

“I am Ho Shusei. You could at least tell me your name, as well.”

The man grinned behind the mask.

“Very well. Call me Mars.”

Shusei’s eyes widened.

This man is Mars?

During Shusei’s dealings with the Ho House, he had heard Neison mention a collaborator by the name of Mars countless times. Mars had apparently worked with Neison on the seed of the plan they were currently carrying out.

Their plan would cause innocent citizens to suffer, and Shusei had wanted no part of it. But when he stepped into the role of master, it became his place to continue the plan. After all, it was already set into motion. He had been handed the reins of a carriage at full speed.

However, Shusei had no intention of blindly executing the schemes of others.

“I’m aware of the name, but little else. When I heard that someone named themselves after an ominous celestial body of discord like Mars, I thought, ‘this must certainly be an interesting fellow.’ I promise I will put your plan into action.”

Mars was considered a bad omen. When it took its position in the sky, it was said to drive men to madness and summon catastrophe. Shusei had no love for any man who would name himself after such a dreadful planet.

“I look forward to seeing how you do,” Mars said while bowing. He then slipped past Shusei.

“Shusei!” Neison called from across the courtyard. With the peonies nearly in bloom, Neison had seemingly decided to take a morning stroll. Shusei followed the walkway down to the courtyard and gave a bow.

“Good morning,” Shusei said. “I was just coming to say hello. I bumped into Mars on the walkway a moment ago.”

“You met him, did you? I figured I’d have to introduce you two eventually, so that saves me the trouble,” Neison said. “He’s wanted to place a Ho on the throne for the last five or six years and has been helping us make that happen. You can rely on him. He was actually here this morning to see how things are progressing. You ought to get to know him.”

“I will, as long as he’s useful. I have no interest in making friends with anyone who doesn’t serve a purpose,” Shusei said.

It was an arrogant thing to say, and Neison raised his eyebrows questioningly, but Shusei simply responded with a confident smile.

“That’s a rather insolent thing to say, Shusei. Do you think you have the right to speak to me like that?” Neison responded.

“I’m plotting against His Majesty as the master of the Ho House. I think it’s far too late to worry about matters like insolence. As I recall, it was you who placed me as head of the family, Grandfather. Do you plan on taking it back? I wonder what my father, Seishu, would think of such arbitrary behavior if he were still alive?”

Neison seemed to bristle at Shusei’s cheerful, composed manner.

“Enough,” Neison said and fell silent. It seemed like he wanted to say something else, but whether out of fear or something else, he had decided not to.

Neison lost his usefulness to me when I ascended to head of the Ho House. I can’t have him moving on his own. All I need from him is to sit back and be quiet. Threatening him is the most effective strategy for that.

Shusei felt it wouldn’t be long before he needed to gain control over this “Mars” fellow as well. He was clearly a jokester if he was calling himself Mars. And between the ridiculous mask and theatrical white shenyi, he certainly

seemed to be fooling around. But if he'd been working with the Ho House for five or six years, he must have been someone important to them.

If Shusei wanted to see his own desires accomplished, he would need to find ways to make Neison and Mars useful. He would have to watch them vigilantly, predict their actions, and turn their very existence toward his goals.

Until the Ho House is completely under my power.

A sensation, cold as the rain from the day before, enveloped his entire body. This was true loneliness.



When Rimi awakened, she found the room filled with soft, morning light. Her sleep-addled mind eventually processed the fact that the storm had ended and morning had come. As she pulled herself from slumber, memories of the night before floated to the top of her consciousness. She sprang out of bed in shock and looked around the room. Shusei was nowhere to be found.

He left without saying a word.

Rimi's heart ached, but before she could dwell on it, Tama tugged at the hem of her robe. She looked down at Tama, who seemed to be trying to get her attention, and found the sack full of lilies had been left by her bed. The ones Shusei had harvested.

Rimi limped over to the sack and discovered characters written on the stone floor in candle wax. She clasped her hands to her mouth and crouched down on the spot.

"Master Shusei? But why?"

For you, the characters said. Shusei had come all this way, just like Rimi, to gather those lilies. So why had he given them all to her?

He said he'd wiped away his feelings for me. That he had raised the banner of revolt against His Majesty in order to enjoy his fate. He said it all so plainly. So then why did he show this act of kindness?

She couldn't understand him. All she felt was miserable pain. Tears began to fill Rimi's eyes once more.

A sunbeam shining through a crack in the door illuminated Rimi's profile. From somewhere far off, she could hear Kunki calling out for her. She was certain he was coming to get her, and yet she could not find the strength to move from where she was for some time.

Chapter 3: Kan Cho'un, the Traitorous Retainer

I

"You must not worry us like that. Kunki was on the verge of tears when he reported last night's events. The news frightened me as well."

Shohi had begun to scold Rimi the moment she'd entered his chambers. His harsh tone made her duck her head.

"I am sorry, Your Majesty. Tama suddenly ran off, and I simply lost my head," she said.

"And that's why you ditched your appointed guard?" Jotetsu said with amusement. He chuckled under his breath.

Rimi was truly sorry for worrying Kunki so badly. Upon finding her, he had screeched her name and collapsed in front of her with tears in his eyes.

I don't think I've ever felt as bad about something as I did then...

Kunki had escorted Rimi back to the Palace of the Water Spirit after that. She had bathed and dressed, then immediately after received a summons from Shohi. He had apparently wanted to make sure she was safe.

Rimi's injured ankle was still sore, but after receiving some medicine and a tight cloth bandage, it was stable enough to walk on. She hadn't fallen ill either, which was more than one could ask for after being stranded in the mountains.

"You said a man was living in the shrine. I wonder what sort of man would be living in a place like that. Maybe he was an actual, real-life heavenly immortal?" Jotetsu said. He had his hands crossed behind his head, seemingly amused by the whole matter.

"He would've been terribly pale and grumpy for an immortal. He seemed more like a bureaucrat from Hell," she said.

"All alone with one of Hell's officials? And you weren't scared?" Shohi said.

Rimi flinched at his words.

When Kunki had arrived at the temple, neither the man nor Shusei had been there. She had mentioned the presence of the strange man but had left out the fact that she had met Shusei.

Even if Shusei had meant it as a provocation, he'd told Shohi that he wanted Rimi. If Shohi knew she'd spent a night together with Shusei, it would've thrown him into turmoil. He didn't need that now, not while he was dealing with the threat of rebellion.

Still, I feel bad about keeping secrets...

Meeting with Shusei without Shohi's knowledge felt immoral. The thought of the lullaby lilies Shusei had given her, which were soaking in water back in the Palace of the Water Spirit's kitchen, made her heart ache. It was as if they were proof of her misconduct.

If I'm going to feel this miserable, I might as well tell him, Rimi thought.

Just as she was about to let out a hesitant "umm," she was cut off as someone appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, Your Majesty. If I may intrude for a moment? It's urgent, so I had to forgo the usual formalities."

"Keiyu?"

It was Jin Keiyu, Minister of Rites. Though he wore his usual, frivolous smile, something in his manner showed he was tense.

"Ordinarily, Chancellor Shu or Rihan would come to you with this, but both of them are handling other matters at the moment. Chancellor Shu has ordered me to come on his behalf," Keiyu said.

"Other matters? What other matters? For what possible reason could they not even bother to appear before me?" Shohi demanded.

"Kan Cho'un, the prefectural administrator of An, has come to the palace. He states he wishes to report directly to you on behalf of the administrators. The chancellor felt it was necessary to have a number of officials present for his report and asked me to obtain your consent," Keiyu explained.

The color drained from Shohi's face. Rimi's eyes widened with shock. Administrator Kan Cho'un, the man at the center of a possible revolt.

"What could he be thinking? He marches into the capital before we can even summon him?" Shohi asked.

"He was adamant that the details of his report be given directly to you. We have no idea as to what he's after. That was why Chancellor Shu decided it was important to have a cadre of officials in attendance so we can deal with matters immediately. May we proceed with the summons, Your Majesty?"

"Of course. I will go to the Hall of New Harmony as well."

By Shohi's command, the ministers and vice-ministers would be ordered to assemble at the Hall of New Harmony. He also ordered Jotetsu to take Rimi back to the Palace of the Water Spirit, after which he left alongside Keiyu to meet with Kojin and Rihan.

"Something is starting..." Rimi murmured as worry overwhelmed her.

"Should we go too? Get a peek inside the Hall of New Harmony?" Jotetsu chirped.

"Can we? Is that allowed?"

"We'll just sneak over before we head to the Palace of the Water Spirit. Nothing to worry about. Besides, I want to get a look at this Hero of the Countryside too."

The man at the center of a smoldering rebellion had marched into the capital. If there was a possibility of seeing what was about to happen, Rimi would rather do that than go back to the Palace of the Water Spirit and worry.

"Will you take me?" Rimi said.

"Just follow me," Jotetsu said. He smiled at her, the smile of a troublemaker, and began to walk.

Jotetsu brought Rimi out through the north side of the Hall of the Rising Dragon where Shohi's chambers were located. From there, he kept them out of sight as they approached the Hall of New Harmony. The officials had received Shohi's command and had begun to gather, entering through the hall's

southern entrance. Jotetsu slipped around to the other side of the building, bringing them to the northern entrance that led to an immense curtain, which hung behind the emperor's throne.

Jotetsu gently pushed aside the curtain and peeked through. He whistled softly.

"Well well, there he is. The one kneeling in front of the throne. That must be Administrator Kan Cho'un. He's awfully young," Jotetsu said, and then he tilted his head gently. "Roko, my hometown, is in An too. I've been hearing stories about the Hero of the Countryside since I was a little brat. There's no way he could be that young."

"Is he really so young?" Rimi asked.

"Can't be much older than me. He woulda been a brat when I was a brat."

"The rumors said he would be the youngest minister ever. Was that in any of the stories you heard as a child?"

"That's what I've been hearing ever since I entered His Majesty's service," Jotetsu said. "I'd heard about a Hero of the Countryside when I was a little squirt, so I was sure they were the same guy. But it doesn't matter how smart a kid is, they can't take the promotion exam. This has gotta be someone different. Just take a look."

At Jotetsu's urging, Rimi peeked through the crack in the curtain to get a look at the man kneeling before the throne. She let out a small peep as she realized who it was.

It was a man with a ghastly complexion and a scowl. The bureaucrat from hell.

"That's the man who was staying in the temple in Gisan!" Rimi said, trying to muffle her voice despite her panic. Jotetsu peeked through the curtain from above Rimi's head.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Mmhmm," Rimi acknowledged with a nod.

The man, who was clothed in a modest, green shenyi, was undoubtedly the same one.

The gathered officials flanked the throne on both sides, exchanging curious whispers as they watched Kan Cho'un. They had all been informed that the administrator of An had come seeking an audience with the emperor, but none of them had any idea why.

There was another official standing in the doorway who was creating a small fuss. Rimi gasped when she spotted him.

A man had boldly stepped forward, clad in a dark-colored shenyi and draped in all the majesty of a young royal. He strode through the room without hesitation, taking position right along the right-hand side of the throne.

Cho'un, sensing the presence of someone nearby, looked up. His eyes narrowed when they met Shusei's.

"Why is Master Shusei here?" Rimi asked.

"Master of the Ho House is, outside of the emperor, the most prestigious position there is," Jotetsu explained with a sour expression. "It means he's first rank, as well. He has no official post, which means he has no government duties or responsibilities. The one thing he does get to have is a voice. Whether or not he gets listened to is up to His Majesty and his officials. But Ho Neison never bothered to show his face for government matters. I wonder what Shusei's up to..."

Master Shusei, you're so far away from me even now.

When he'd held her during the thunderstorm, she had believed he was the same old Shusei. But he had dashed her hopes and beliefs with the wave of a hand. And now, as she watched him stand there regally in all his finery, she realized Shusei was standing in a place she could never reach.

"His Majesty is coming!" one of the officials announced. Shu Kojin, To Rihan, and Jin Keiyu all appeared; Shohi followed behind them. All of the officials, even Shusei, bowed in unison. As Shohi went to ascend to the throne, he suddenly noticed Shusei. The emperor frowned slightly but continued making his way to the throne.

"All of you, raise your heads," Shohi commanded. Cho'un raised his head but remained on his knees.

Shohi glared down at Cho'un from his throne, who met his gaze with cool, composed eyes.

"Kan Cho'un, Administrator of An Prefecture," Shohi began, "I am told you have something to report directly to me. Something you could say to neither my ministers nor my chancellor. So tell me now, what is it that has such *grave* importance."

Cho'un took a long, deep breath.

"I am Administrator Kan Cho'un. I come as a representative of all five prefectural administrators to inform you of our collective intent," he said. Though his voice was soft, it somehow echoed throughout the Hall of New Harmony, as if it were gliding along the polished stone floor. "We will not be collecting taxes in any of the prefectures for the next year."

The significance of the words was lost on Rimi, but from the sound of disbelief Jotetsu made, she could tell that Cho'un had said something unbelievable.

Shohi's eyes widened and the other officials' mouths hung agape. Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu all seemed lost for words as well. Even Shusei stared at Cho'un incredulously.

What was it I learned when I was studying with Master Shusei for the Executive Audience?

Konkoku was a centralized government organized around an emperor. The imperial court was involved in every single domestic matter. The territory of the empire was split into five regions known as prefectures, which were governed by administrators who were dispatched by the capital. The administrators were responsible for supervising the prefectures, upholding the law, fostering the economy, and collecting taxes. The taxes they collected made up fifty percent of the empire's total funds. The other half came from the profit made by overseas trade and merchants operating within the city.

If the administrators refuse to collect taxes, then doesn't that mean the empire's funds will be cut in half?! The administrators were sent by the capital! There's no way they can do that!

A terrifying word bubbled to the surface of Rimi's mind: rebellion.

Everyone was dazed and left speechless by the enormity of the situation. Cho'un, the only one who was still composed, bowed.

"The economic situation in the five prefectures grows ever worse," Cho'un said. "We do not presently have the luxury of transferring tax money to the central government. This is all I have to report. Therefore, I will excuse myself."

Cho'un stood and turned around. As he slowly walked away, Shohi finally recovered his senses to the point he could stand up from his throne.

"I order you to wait, Kan Cho'un! You and all the other administrators truly intend to defy me?!" he shouted.

Cho'un stopped and turned back around.

"No, Your Majesty," Cho'un said with a composed expression. "I simply came to inform you that what cannot be done cannot be done."

"This is treason! Apprehend this traitor at once!" Kojin shouted.

Right as the guards were about to move, someone stepped forward to defend Cho'un.

"Please wait. Don't you think declaring him a traitor after just a few words is a bit rash, Chancellor Shu?" Shusei said with a smile, breaking the tension as he stood up for Cho'un.

"You?" Cho'un mumbled in apparent shock. Shusei simply responded with a reassuring glance.

"You, Shusei?" Shohi groaned.

"I beseech you to keep a cool head as well, Your Majesty. Arresting the man without any sort of deliberation would be outright barbaric," Shusei said. "Should we not carefully consider the situation before jumping to conclusions? If you were to arrest the Hero of the Countryside without any manner of deliberation, it could very well shake the people's faith in you. He is particularly popular among the citizens."

Kojin glared at Shusei as if he were trying to murder him with his eyes. Rihan's hands balled into fists, and Keiyu narrowed his eyes.

"Regarding the matter of Cho'un's report, we must investigate the true state

of affairs. Only then can we know whether it is a simple notice of intent or an act of rebellion,” Shusei continued, never faltering.

The other officials watched in confusion, holding their breath as Shohi and Shusei stared each other down.

“Of course, I understand that Cho’un cannot be left unchecked,” Shusei continued. “Therefore, I have a suggestion. Would you be willing to hand custody of him to the Ho House? You, the chancellor, and your ministers would be able to investigate matters at your leisure. As the Ho House cannot involve itself in matters of rulership, I believe leaving him with us would be a perfect compromise. Is this acceptable?”

Rimi wasn’t sure why Shusei had suggested taking in Cho’un, but everything he’d said made perfect sense to her. Konkoku was a country of law. No matter how outrageous the statement, arresting someone on the spot was simply barbaric. Deliberation was obviously required. While the Ho House could not involve themselves in politics, as a branch of the royal family, they had the status, wealth, and public confidence that made them a natural choice to hold Cho’un.

The other officials seemed to feel the same as many began to nod in agreement.

However...

This is going to look like His Majesty and Master Shusei butted heads and Master Shusei came out as the clear victor.

A cold flame of rage flared in Kojin’s eyes. He continued staring at Shusei as if the young Ho were his bitterest enemy, but Shusei didn’t meet his gaze. He was focused solely on Shohi.

“Dammit, Shusei. He’s trying to show all the ministers he’s challenging His Majesty directly,” Jotetsu grumbled.

Rimi could feel the anxiety growing inside of her. Making a public display of their confrontational attitudes wouldn’t benefit either of them. She felt it would only lead to unintended disaster.

She wondered how badly Shohi was suffering at this very moment. What did

the officials think, seeing him cornered by Shusei? They'd already felt some measure of scorn for the young emperor.

Shohi was biting his lip, and she could see it tremble a bit. He must have been furious.

Moments before Shusei had offered a reasonable argument, Shohi had seemed to support Cho'un's arrest. It made the emperor look like a child with no common sense. He should have simply accepted Shusei's claim, but Shohi's pride wouldn't allow him to relent.

"It would seem you have no objections. I will depart with Cho'un, then. I leave the deliberations to the rest of you," Shusei said, smiling at the emperor. Shusei urged Cho'un to move with a pat on the back and began to walk away.

As Shusei turned his back on the emperor to leave through the large door, Shohi could bear no more.

"Shusei!" Shohi roared, his lip still trembling.

Shusei turned back around and gave a graceful bow. He then smiled victoriously at Shohi as he turned to leave once more.

Shohi threw himself down into his throne and pounded both armrests with his fists. The sound echoed through the Hall of New Harmony.



Shohi returned to his chambers with the inescapable feeling that everything had shattered around him. He slumped down onto the sofa and covered his face with his hand. He didn't think he even had the strength to stand back up.

The moment Shohi had descended from his throne, Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu had swarmed him, wanting to discuss what should be done about Cho'un. Shohi had told them it would have to wait until the next day. He then fled from the Hall of New Harmony.

Shohi was in no mood to talk to anyone. He ordered that no one was to come to his chambers. Not his servants, not his officials, not even Jotetsu.

I never imagined Shusei would be such a nuisance.

Shusei had been a brilliant, reliable cuisinologist and grand councilor. As an ally, no one else was more reliable. Now, as an enemy, there was no one else more frightening. As the realization sunk in, Shohi began to feel hopeless.

Shusei hates me, doesn't he?

How else could he interpret Shusei's behavior? But *why* did Shusei hate him? Shohi couldn't come up with a clear answer. The only conclusion he could draw was Rimi.

Did he really desire Rimi that badly? If I'd known he'd felt that strongly about her... If I'd known all this would come to pass, I'd rather have just given her to—

As the thought began to develop, Shohi felt appalled at himself.

What the hell am I thinking?! She isn't some object I can just give away!

Shohi wanted to see Rimi right away. If he could see that carefree smile and feel her gentle presence, he was sure his despair would abate. But how could he look her in the eyes after thinking such things? Pain gripped Shohi's heart, and he placed a hand on his chest.

"Your Majesty?"

Shohi jumped and looked up to see who had spoken. Hakurei was kneeling before the sofa with his head raised. The eunuch's beautiful, golden-brown eyes were colored with concern.

"I thought I had ordered that no officials or servants were to approach me," Shohi said.

"Ah, but I am a eunuch, making me neither an official nor a servant," Hakurei responded.

"More trickery? Get out."

"Though I may have been appointed director, I still intend to act as your personal attendant. And as such, I consider it my duty to offer comfort. You seem dreadfully pale. Are you in pain?"

"Pain is not the word I would use," Shohi replied.

He had intended to respond with a simple "no," but the deep kindness in Hakurei's eyes suddenly brought back memories of earlier days. How he used to smile at Shohi when Hakurei had still been a young noble staying in the rear palace. That smile used to make Shohi happy. It had always been so full of compassion and concern, just as it was now.

Shohi suddenly felt his vision blur as something warm welled up inside of him. He looked away from Hakurei.

"Your Majesty?" Hakurei prodded.

Shohi remained silent with his face turned away. He then felt Hakurei embrace his head softly, holding him as if he were cradling a child.

"Let go," Shohi said quietly. Instead, Hakurei pretended he hadn't heard and held him even tighter.

"It's difficult, isn't it? Never being able to show any weakness as emperor. But that is why you have an empress, your four consorts, and the rear palace. To help ease that suffering. Go to Rimi. She's what you need right now," Hakurei said.

"I can't."

"And why not? Why not now, of all times?"

“I don’t have the right to see her. I thought something awful about her a moment ago,” Shohi said.

He gritted his teeth and buried his head in Hakurei’s sleeve. It felt smooth and smelled pleasantly sweet, though Shohi couldn’t place the smell.

“When I thought that Shusei wanted Rimi so badly he’d become a bitter enemy, I wondered if it all could’ve been avoided. If I had known how badly he desired Rimi, I thought maybe I could have given her to Shusei. As if she’s some sort of doll,” Shohi confessed.

“I see,” Hakurei said, nodding along in understanding. “That’s a common thing. When people are in pain, they think of all sorts of things to try to escape it. We can think terrible things in the hopes of escape. I sometimes work myself up to the point of illness.”

Hakurei didn’t chastise Shohi for his desperate, cruel thoughts. Perhaps it was his own experience with pain and misery that allowed him to refrain from doing so. Pain could make people think things they never imagined. Surely only those who knew nothing but joy could condemn someone suffering over their own heartless thoughts, for they had never known real pain.

“Even so, those feelings of regret are exactly why you should go see Rimi,” Hakurei said. He was not speaking as director of the rear palace. He was speaking as the brother and young noble Shohi had once known. Realizing that, Shohi gave a small nod.



Rimi had soaked the bulbs of the lullaby lilies in water for half a day in order to remove the lye from them. She then rinsed them clean and steamed them. Doing so removed the water from the bulbs, leaving them crumbly. Rimi then ground the bulbs down even smaller and mixed them with rice flour and sugar, after which she rolled them into bite-sized sticky rice cakes.

She offered one to Tama, who licked it up with delight. Rimi tried one as well. The rice cakes were soft and pleasant with just a hint of sweetness. They would probably be delicious with molasses or a sweet sesame sauce. Rimi felt they might also make a good ingredient for a sweet tang. She decided a sweet, creamy dipping sauce would be the best choice for a suppertime meal.

She'd intended to treat Shohi to a nice supper with the lullaby lilies, but considering the events of the day, she doubted he'd have the time to relax and enjoy a leisurely supper.

Still, even if she couldn't serve him today, there was always tomorrow or the next day. As long as she could just bring him supper someday, that was enough. With that thought in mind, Rimi left the kitchen.

I wonder how His Majesty is doing?

A beam of moonlight reflected off the Jade Spring in the center of the Palace of the Water Spirit. Rimi clumsily sat on the railing of a balcony and looked down at the glistening, rippling reflection of the full moon. Tama amused herself by bouncing to and fro atop the railing.

Master Shusei scares me.

When Shusei had confronted Shohi so directly, all while wearing a smile, she'd felt frightened of him for the first time. She'd also felt the urge to hold and protect Shohi as he trembled with anger.

I went searching for lullaby lilies in order to give them to His Majesty, yet Master Shusei gave them to me. How can he be so kind and yet so frightening at the same time?

Wind blew from across the water's surface and shook the buyao in Rimi's hair. The light jangling sound had a hopeless emptiness to it.

"Rimi."

Rimi jumped at the voice and lost her balance. She wobbled and feared she would pitch forward, right into the water. Right as she was about to scream, someone rushed to her side and grabbed her by the waist to support her.

"Are you trying to drown yourself right in front of me?! Enough of these mindless games!"

Rimi blinked repeatedly. Before her was a face with refined features and long eyelashes, so close it was nearly touching her nose.

"Your Majesty? What's going on? Why are you here? I never received word you'd be coming," she said.

“I didn’t want to wait for a messenger. I rode straight here on my horse. It’s just me,” Shohi explained.

“What?! That’s so dangerous! Why would you do something so reckless?”

“Because I couldn’t wait to see you. Do you have a problem with that?”

Rimi couldn’t help but smile softly, seeing him act so gruff with such beautiful eyes. Shohi suddenly grew shy at her smile and lowered her down from the balcony.

“What? Why the ridiculous face?” Shohi asked.

“I was just thinking how happy I was to see you too. I prepared supper for you and I was wondering if you might be willing to eat some,” Rimi said.

“Were you expecting me to come?” he said.

“No, I didn’t think you’d be able to. But I figured there was always the one in ten thousand chance,” she said.

“You mean to say you prepared supper for me on an off chance?”

“That’s right. Please, just wait a moment.”

Rimi had no doubt that Shohi had been forced into coming to the Palace of the Water Spirit. With everything going on, there was no way he had either the time or the energy to spend all his nights with Rimi. Even so, Shohi had surely come looking, strong-armed or not, for something to soothe his frazzled nerves.

That Shohi would come to her in his time of need delighted Rimi.

There was certainly the possibility that he had come hoping for a woman’s comfort. Even so, he’d made it clear that he wouldn’t do anything of the sort until the end of the Nocturnal Liturgy. He must have come for a different sort of comfort, then. A kind voice or a kind word, perhaps. But Rimi had an even better way of comforting him.

Treat him to a cuisinological supper!

Rimi went to the kitchen and pulled the lullaby lily rice cakes out of the wooden storage box.

Shohi would likely be returning to the imperial palace tonight, so Rimi wanted

to give him something that would provide a bit of energy rather than a relaxing pre-bed meal. Instead of warm tang, she'd give him something sweet and energetic to fuel his body. Rimi drizzled some of the rice cakes with a generous serving of molasses, placed them on a white porcelain dish, and returned to Shohi.

The emperor was seated at a table, which had been left on the balcony. He was watching moonlight cascade down to the water's surface.

"A cuisinological supper for you, Your Majesty. They are called baihebing, lullaby cakes. Please, enjoy," Rimi said.

She then filled a white porcelain teacup with a mellow, calming dandelion tea. Rimi felt Shohi's mind was already in chaos, so she decided plain, white tableware would be gentler on his eyes.

Sweet food eases a weary heart and will warm Master Shohi's body, granting him strength.

Shohi reached for one of the cakes and placed it in his mouth.

"Perfectly sized, aren't they?" he said. "Sweet, though." It sounded like a complaint, but he still ate the entire plate.

"You called them lullaby cakes. They're made from lullaby lilies, then?" Shohi asked as he sipped the dandelion tea. His tone was demanding but a bit gentler than before.

"Yes, Your Majesty. The reason I went to Gisan yesterday was to collect lullaby lilies. Unfortunately, I caused both you and Master Kunki a great deal of worry in the process."

Rimi suddenly remembered meeting Kan Cho'un at the temple. She never would've imagined meeting a prefectural administrator in such simple attire in the middle of the mountains. Prefectural administrator was a fairly important position. She would have expected him to live in a mansion, surrounded by servants and dressed in silk. But Cho'un appeared to have no interest in fine houses or rich silks. He had the humble modesty of a heavenly immortal.

"Do you remember when I said I stayed at a temple overnight in Gisan? Master Kan Cho'un was there as well. I realized today when I saw him."

“What?! *Him*?! What was he doing there?!” Shohi demanded as he leaned forward.

“Nothing in particular. It seemed like he lived there. He didn’t come across as self-serving. He didn’t seem to have any interest in fame, money, or love. I can’t help but wonder why a man like that would revolt against you. It seems so strange.”

Cho’un hadn’t struck Rimi as an egotistical, corrupt official. He was strange and unapproachable, but he was also surprisingly kind.

“But Ma Ijun came to me pleading for help, claiming the administrators are tyrants. Not to mention, Shusei came to his aid,” Shohi said.

“That’s true. What do you think is going on?” Rimi asked.

“I have no real idea what it is that Cho’un wants,” Shohi said. “Even if he is plotting a rebellion, what reason could he have to foolishly come before me and declare he won’t pay taxes? It’d be far safer to simply send a letter declaring the provinces independent.”

Shohi turned his gaze to the floor, deep in thought. He looked so steadfast to Rimi. All the panic and confusion from before had faded away. He had recovered his composure and could now analyze the situation.

Shohi had been faced with one difficult situation after another, and his youth and inexperience left him vulnerable to being pushed around by others. The loss of Shusei had left him especially weak-hearted. Even so, once Shohi had been able to stop, eat something sweet, and catch his breath, he was able to collect himself. That alone showed he had the temperament of an emperor. If he truly had the heart of a rabbit, some baihebing and warm tea wouldn’t be enough to calm him.

Rimi found herself wanting to see Shohi reach greater and greater heights.

“In order to know what Cho’un intends, we need to know what’s actually happening in the provinces. But if it’s true that the administrators are corrupt, then we can’t rely on their reports. Yet the way things are structured, nobody but an administrator can really grasp what’s happening in a prefecture,” Shohi said. “So how do we investigate the state of the provinces without relying on

the existing system? Ordinarily, I'd have Rihan assemble a team to investigate, but on top of being time-consuming, I can't dismiss the possibility of an administrator bribing the investigators."

Shohi's eyes were resolute.

"I know," he said quietly. "I can go. If I hid my identity and visited the provinces myself..."

"Oh, umm, I don't know... That's a little reckless, don't you think?" Rimi said, stunned by the ridiculous idea.

"I agree. It's the very height of recklessness," a voice called out from the room connected to the balcony. It was sweetly feminine yet bold.

III

Rimi and Shohi turned in unison to see who had spoken. They were greeted by the sight of four magnificently blooming flowers, the four consorts. And not just them, but Jotetsu and Hakurei also stood closely behind them. It appeared So had been the one to speak.

All of the consorts looked tense. Consort Ho in particular demanded attention with the cold decisiveness dwelling in her eyes.

"What are you all doing in the Palace of the Water Spirit?" Shohi asked, shocked.

"Hakurei informed us that you seemed rather tired," So explained with a sweet smile. "It seemed like a rather large burden to place on Lady Setsu alone, so we came as well."

"And it's a good thing we did," On said, gently chastising Shohi, "now that we know what a terribly reckless thing you were considering. Please, avoid placing yourself in danger, Your Majesty."

"I cannot afford to sit around and wait," Shohi said. "This crisis demands action, and I—"

"I'll go," Jotetsu said, cutting Shohi off as he stepped forward. "I can look into what's really going on in the provinces. I'm stronger than you, after all, and I

know more about how the outside world works. It'll be easier for me to gather info. A lone agent works faster, anyway. I'm pretty confident I'll be more useful than a slapped together team of bureaucrats."

"You?" Shohi said. His eyes were wide with surprise at the sudden proposal.

"What, don't you trust me?" Jotetsu said. "If you don't trust me, then I'm in some real trouble. I vowed to be your sword. I'm gonna look like a real ass if the person I pledged myself to doesn't even believe in me."

"No, of course I have faith in you. I just... I suppose I forgot that I had you," Shohi said.

"You're breaking my heart," Jotetsu said. He made an elaborate show of sulking, but there was a smile in his eyes. "But you remember now, right? Just give me the order."

Jotetsu kneeled and bowed his head with a grin.

Yo suddenly stepped forward, placing herself alongside Jotetsu, who raised a curious eyebrow. Her hands were balled into fists.

"If you're going to order Jotetsu, then order me too!" she cried. Shohi and Rimi were both taken aback by the sudden, resolute demand.

"Order you to do what?" Shohi asked.

"I'm the daughter of Ma Ijun," Yo explained. "He's a greedy, vile man, and I detest him. However, I can't deny that he's a powerful merchant with dealings in every part of the empire. I just know he can find out what's going on faster than any government official can. If you let me get close to him for a while, I'm confident that I can discover a lot of information. I'm sure if Jotetsu and I compare notes, we can get an idea of what's going on!" There was a determined fire in Yo's eyes.

If she does that, just think of how much more information we could get...

Even so, Rimi knew how much Yo hated her father. Yo hated him so much that it had led her to hate all men. Rimi didn't want her to do something she was uncomfortable with.

It was Ho's turn to step forward. She placed herself alongside Yo, bowed, and

raised her head. There was a sharp beauty in her tense expression.

“I ask you to order me as well, Your Majesty,” Ho pleaded. “I will find what the Ho House truly intends. I could return home under the pretense of visiting, like Consort Yo.”

“The Ho House made their antagonism quite clear today,” Shohi said. “The Ho House is effectively enemy territory. It would be a dangerous place for one of my consorts. And you, Consort Yo. Sending you to your father may not be dangerous, but you speak of the man like he’s a poisonous insect. It would not be a pleasant duty. And what’s more—”

“Your Majesty?” So said, interrupting Shohi with a smile. “Please, do not worry about us. I can accompany Yo, and On can accompany Ho. We will say we are dear friends who left the palace to compose ourselves. I believe accompanying Consort Yo will put her more at ease as well. Consort On could serve as Consort Ho’s handmaid, which means we would not need to worry about Ho being surrounded entirely by the Ho House’s brainwashed handmaids. On’s attendants can serve as further insurance for Ho. Since On belongs to one of the Five Houses, the Ho House would never dare mistreat her.”

“We understand your worries, Your Majesty,” On said softly. “We make this proposal with your concerns in mind. Isn’t that right, everyone?” Her tone was gentle but the confident determination in her voice spoke clearly: *Leave it to us.*

The four consorts all exchanged glances and nodded. Consort So stared up at Shohi once more.

“Your Majesty, we are your retainers,” So said. “Those are your own words.



Shohi was in a daze.

I forgot the four consorts as well, just like I did with Jotetsu. That’s right. At the Declaration of Stability, I told them I would treat them as my most trusted retainers and asked them to support me.

And they had taken it to heart. They were trying to support Shohi.

When the four consorts had heard the Nocturnal Liturgy was being postponed, they had been furious. However, they had backed down after

considering Shohi's feelings. They had reminded him then that they were his retainers as well. Shohi hadn't understood at the time why they said that. They had even said that nothing had changed since the Declaration of Stability.

I may have forgotten, but the four consorts didn't.

The decision Shohi had made at the Declaration of Stability, as well as what he'd said to the four consorts, had clearly left an impression on them. That was why they were here now, looking up at him.

I remember how torn I was over which of the four I should choose. So I decided I would disregard ceremony and chose none of them.

It seemed that had been the right choice.

The four consorts are here as my retainers. And not just them either.

Shohi felt like his eyes were only just opening as his surroundings came into view.

Jotetsu had risked his life to protect the woman Shohi loved, even after being released from service. He had then pledged himself as Shohi's sword, a pledge he was here honoring.

Hakurei had claimed he was only trying to determine if Shohi was suited for the throne, but he had done far more to support the emperor than his duty as a eunuch demanded, speaking to Shohi like a brother.

And tonight, Rimi had made Shohi supper despite there only being a slight possibility that he would visit her. It was comforting, soothing him in a way that must have been what Rimi had been hoping for when she'd made it for him. Her concern and devotion were unquestionable.

Shusei's departure had left Shohi lost, lonely, and reeling. But that was because Shohi had forgotten what was important, having lost sight of the people around him.



Rimi, the four consorts, Jotetsu, and Hakurei were all still by Shohi's side. It would be a waste if their master was unreliable and wavering. If they had decided their place in the world was beside Shohi, then he needed to make sure it was a place worthy of them. Giving a purpose to others was Shohi's own purpose.

Shohi's place was on the throne. It was the place he'd longed for since he was a child, but it turned out not to be what he expected. He hadn't been prepared for the choking weight of responsibility. It was a heavy thing, giving others a place to belong. But it was what he'd wished for, and intended or not, it was where he now found himself.

My place in the world is my retainers' place in the world. I must protect it and myself.

It was the duty of an emperor.

I am an emperor. The voice in Shohi's mind was strong now.

Jotetsu remained kneeling, awaiting his order. The four consorts all watched Shohi.

Shohi had forgotten his own words and overlooked their loyalty. He was a fool and a sorry excuse for a master. That was why he needed to prove himself worthy of being their master by giving them their orders now. He took a deep breath.

"Jotetsu, depart Annei at once. Investigate the five provinces and find the state of our crop and animal production. Learn of the weather, the state of public order, the state of the market, the citizens' way of life, everything. Then give me a detailed report," Shohi said.

He turned his attention to the consorts.

"In the meantime, Consorts Yo and So, you are granted leave. Go to Ma Ijun to learn about what's been happening in the provinces and report back to me. Consorts Ho and On, I grant you permission to go to the Ho House. Learn what the master of Ho intends and find what they hope to gain from giving Kan Cho'un their patronage," Shohi commanded.

Jotetsu and the four consorts all bowed their heads in response to Shohi's calm orders.

"I will order Rihan to investigate the provinces as well," Shohi said. "In the meantime, I will confer with Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu to decide what should be done with Cho'un. If the administrators truly are corrupt, I will be prepared to dispense justice immediately."

The commands had come one after another, and Shohi finally allowed himself to take a breath.

"Take care of yourselves, everyone," Shohi continued. "Ho and On, you two especially. You are walking into enemy territory, and I have no idea what might happen. Still, I believe in both of you. I send you there with faith that you will return with what I need. I order you to exercise good judgment and protect yourselves. You are to withdraw whenever you feel the time is right."

Jotetsu and the four consorts all quietly watched Shohi.

"I leave this in your hands, my retainers," he said with a smile, meeting their gaze.



Rimi quivered slightly at Shohi's smile and voice. There was something different about him. It was like watching a butterfly slowly spread its wings.

The moonlight rippled beautifully on the water's surface.

Jotetsu departed Annei that night. He had decided to entrust Shohi's care to Kyo Kunki while away. Before Jotetsu departed, he'd warned Kunki to not let his guard down. The ever-diligent Kunki interpreted this as a command to stick irritatingly close to Shohi.

"Stick to His Majesty like glue every hour of the day!" That's what Jotetsu told me!" Kunki said. His shiny cheeks glistened with life.

"Jotetsu likes to think he's hilarious," Shohi grumbled.

Rimi couldn't help but imagine Kunki would "stick to" Shohi even if it meant joining him in bed.

Jotetsu ought to be fine. It's the four consorts I'm worried about.

A few days later, Rimi wrapped sweet bean paste in skins and fried them in fat to make teacakes. She created a mountain of them, which she brought to the rear palace. It was the perfect excuse to go see the four consorts. They would be leaving the next day for the Ma and Ho Houses.

Consort Yo was visiting her father, whom she absolutely detested. And she was joined by Consort So, who Ma Ijun hoped to marry. It was a big entanglement of fate.

Then there was Consort Ho's journey home. The danger there went without saying. For Consort Ho, who'd sworn herself to Shohi's service, the Ho House was the equivalent of enemy territory. Not to mention Shusei's presence there. Even with a member of one of the Five Houses like Consort On joining her, Rimi couldn't help but worry that something might happen. Shusei's latest behavior had been inscrutable. There was always the chance that he might do something brash and heartless.

Those worries were what drove Rimi to visit the consorts before they left.

When Rimi arrived at the Palace of Great Light where Yo lived, she found her and So gathering up things they would need for their trip home.

"Oh wow! Dearest! How lovely! And you brought so many teacakes!" Yo exclaimed as she saw the long, golden-brown and sugar-coated pastries.

The consorts' preparations had left the living room in disarray, so Yo led Rimi to the gazebo in the courtyard for tea. The area was in full bloom, and little white and yellow butterflies danced whimsically among the flowers.

"These are delicious!" Yo said. "My daily snacks just don't do it for me when you're not here in the rear palace, dearest! It's such a joy when you stop by like this, though, so I suppose I shouldn't complain!"

Rimi felt a bit troubled by Yo's forced display of exuberance. Yo despised her father with every part of her being. She hated her father so much that it spilled over into hate for all men. Even if she was returning to Ma Ijun's side for Shohi's sake, her heart surely must have been heavy.

“Once you come back, I’ll make all of your favorite sweets, Yo,” Rimi said.

“Yaaaay! Then I want some of those fluffy steamed cakes. You know, the ones with crumbled, dried fruit all over them?” Yo said.

“Of course, I’ll make you all you can eat. Make sure you return in good health, okay?” Rimi said.

“Yes... All right, I will,” Yo said with a weak smile. It was like the strength had suddenly drained out of her. Rimi’s heart ached at the sight.

“Yo, don’t you think you’re pushing yourself too far?” Rimi asked without thinking.

“You ask the stupidest questions, Lady Setsu,” So said. “You always were a foolish one.” She placed her dish on the table and fixed Rimi with a sharp glare.

Chapter 4: One for Each

I

“What? That was a stupid question?” Rimi asked.

“The stupidest. Yo could never return to Ma Ijun’s side *without* pushing herself. Whether she wants to or not, she has chosen to go. I’m also forcing myself to do this,” So said, puffing out her chest. “The idea of spending even a moment near that depraved man terrifies me. But we both decided we’d do this, even if it means pushing ourselves. It is for His Majesty. What *you* can do is comfort His Majesty in every way possible while we are gone. And spend every other waking hour making us sweets for us to enjoy when we return! I will, of course, be expecting a veritable mountain of kaorizuke as well. My skin becomes an absolute mess without it.”

Rimi stared in blank amazement. She wasn’t sure if So was scolding her, relying on her, or comforting her. Perhaps it was all three.

“Wow! Somebody thinks they’re important,” Yo said, half-amazed by So’s domineering attitude. So simply lifted her chin even higher.

“I do not ‘think’ I am important. I *am* important. I am one of the four consorts, after all,” So said.

“That means the same goes for me, then?” Yo said as she erupted in laughter.

“Indeed. You are important as well. Show a little self-awareness,” So said.

“Okaaaaay,” Yo said with a laugh.

Rimi couldn’t help but laugh as well. So’s iron will and Yo’s emotional resilience comforted her.

“I have to bring Consorts On and Ho their treats as well,” Rimi said.

After Rimi left the Palace of Great Light, she headed for the Palace of Great

Heights where On resided. Preparations were also underway there. On was delighted by the treats and thanked Rimi for her concern.

“I’m fine. There’s nothing to worry about,” On said with a carefree smile. She then placed a hand over her cheek and sighed with a gloomy expression. “Though I am concerned for Consort Ho. The weight of duty seems to hang especially heavy on her. Ho is pledged to His Majesty’s service, so while the Ho House is her home, it is also enemy territory. She will likely be treated as a traitor. Please, forget about me. Give Ho your support.”

On smiled kindly and Rimi quickly excused herself.

Rimi made her way to the Palace of Great Purity where Ho lived and found her sitting leisurely upon the sofa of her living room, her long, slender legs crossed. Unlike the other consorts, she wasn’t busy preparing herself. She had apparently taken care of everything already.

“Finished preparing already? Just what I’d expect from you, Consort Ho! There’s nothing worrying you, is there?” Rimi asked.

“How preposterous,” Ho said with a smirk. It was as if she was trying to avoid showing any weakness. Pretending she was fine seemed to be something the consort was quite accustomed to.

Ho stood up from the couch and approached the treats Rimi had brought. She was about to take one when a handmaid appeared.

“Virtuous Consort, Director Sai Hakurei has come bearing a sealed writ permitting a long-term period of leave,” the handmaid said.

Ho froze and her expression stiffened.

“Then take it,” she said coldly.

“As the writ bears His Majesty’s seal, it can only be delivered directly to you, Virtuous Consort,” the handmaid said.

“I suppose I have no choice, then. Send him in,” Ho said.

The handmaid excused herself at Ho’s command, and Hakurei appeared soon after. He carried the letter and, for some reason, a birdcage containing a dove.

He looked amused and nodded slightly at Rimi when he noticed her, but he quickly composed himself. Hakurei approached Ho and bowed before her. The disgust on Ho's face was clear.

Rimi's heart ached at the sight of them. The two held such fondness for each other. Why did they have to be like this? Ever since that vicious night at Castle Seika, every meeting between them had turned into a tense standoff.

"I bring a writ from His Majesty," Hakurei said impersonally, ignoring the look in Ho's eyes. "I ask that you keep it close at hand for the duration of your leave."

"Fine. Put it there and excuse yourself," Ho said coldly, jutting her chin toward a table.

Hakurei placed the letter on the table as requested and placed the birdcage alongside it.

"Please, keep this near you as well. It is trained to return to me. If you are unable to send a message and need to contact someone quickly, please make use of it," Hakurei said.

"A bird trained to return to you? Don't make me laugh. Any bird reared by you is too repulsive to keep around," Ho said. Venom dripped from every word.

"Consort Ho!" Rimi said, unable to stay quiet. "He's not like—"

"Rimi," Hakurei sharply cut her off. Rimi quickly clamped her mouth shut, and Hakurei gave a small nod.

"His Majesty has expressed particular concern for your safety. The Ho House may be your home, but it is also a place of danger. He expressed as much to you, did he not? Please, understand his concern and take the bird as a security measure, at the very least," Hakurei said.

"Then prepare a different bird. One associated with someone other than you," Ho said.

"A bird like this is an emergency measure meant for when there is no other option," Hakurei explained. "In a situation like that, whatever you may be writing should not fall into the hands of someone who wishes His Majesty harm."

Therefore, only a bird trained to return to someone His Majesty can trust should be used. This is our only option at the moment, so you will simply have to bear it.”

“No. I cannot and will not bear it,” Ho said as she looked away.

“Please, reconsider,” Hakurei said.

“I said no! Leave! And take that filthy bird with you!”

Hakurei took a small step toward Ho. His expression remained perfectly calm as he slapped her across the cheek. Rimi clapped her hands to her mouth.

It didn’t seem to have been a hard strike, but Ho placed a hand on her cheek and stared at Hakurei with wide eyes in mute amazement.

“What do you think you’re doing? A director striking one of the four consorts?” Ho said.

“Forgive my rudeness, Virtuous Consort Ho. But you are being utterly unreasonable. Punish me if you so wish, but I ask you to submit to this one request,” Hakurei said dispassionately. “Hate me if you will. Insult me as much as you like. But His Majesty fears for you, and for his sake, I beg you to keep this bird with you. If we had the time, I would prepare a different bird, but we do not. We must use what is available to us. If you are a servant of His Majesty as you claim, then I hope you will not let your hatred of me compound his worries.”

“You filthy, repugnant—”

“Filthy and repugnant though I may be, am I wrong?”

Ho tried to find the words to respond, but Hakurei’s response rang true. Ho was a clever woman. Clever enough to admit that Hakurei was right. She bit her lip and looked down.

Rimi was panicking as she felt the distance between Ho and Hakurei grow wider and wider. But Hakurei wanted to hide the truth of his feelings for Ho, and so she was left unable to say anything.

“It seems you understand. Please, keep the bird close by. I, of course, hope that you have no need for such measures, but it is best to be safe. I shall take

my leave,” Hakurei said. Then he bowed and left the room.

Ho was paralyzed with humiliation and anger. Rimi snuggled up against her and led her to the sofa. She then sat the consort down and prepared some tea for her. Rimi felt powerless as she handed the tea to Ho.

Master Hakurei has made Ho hate him even more. I don't think this can be fixed.

A teardrop landed on the surface of the tea. Small teardrops, like little beads, rolled down Ho's cheeks.

“Admonished by a man like him. Can you imagine?” Ho said.

Rimi was touched by Ho's tears. The consort had realized she had spoken selfishly out of her hatred for Hakurei and now felt ashamed by that fact. Something was charming about her emotionally charged tears, which mixed anger and remorse.

“Virtuous Consort Ho, His Majesty is overjoyed that you would offer to investigate the Ho House's true intentions. It's his kindness that makes him worry. That's why Master Hakurei—”

“I know that. I have an important duty,” Ho said, wiping her eyes. “I will bring the bird with me. I don't want His Majesty to worry.”

Rimi sighed with relief. She wanted Ho to be as safe as possible while in enemy territory.

Master Hakurei wasn't just being harsh with Ho for His Majesty's sake. He did it to protect her.

As the two drank their tea and nibbled on sweets together, Ho seemed to calm down. Rimi promised she would make lots of sweets for Ho when she returned and then excused herself.

She considered going to see Shohi, but he had been in constant meetings with Kojin. Even if Rimi did suddenly drop by, she doubted she'd be able to see the emperor. Instead, she decided to return to the Palace of the Water Spirit.

Rimi entered her carriage and opened the window, letting the warm spring air and the bustling noise of Annei flood in. The main market street seemed to

grow livelier as the temperature grew warmer, and the vegetables lining the stalls were bright and colorful. Though the bustle made the air thick with dust, Rimi loved to see everyone's spirit invigorated by spring.

As Rimi gazed idly at the stalls passing by, she noticed a familiar man.

"Wait, who was that? Oh, stop the carriage!" Rimi suddenly cried out.

The carriage stopped, and Rimi poked her head out of the window and picked the man out from the crowd as he shuffled along.

That's definitely him!

It was Kan Cho'un, representative of the five administrators and the man who was standing in defiance of Shohi.

"Why is a man like him just strolling around in a place like this?" Rimi asked herself.

His borderline treasonous declaration that he would not send tax money to the capital had left the imperial court in turmoil. It was absurd to think he would be wandering through the city without a care in the world. The man didn't need to be racked with worry, but a little humility seemed in order. Cho'un had opposed the emperor. Shusei's patronage was the only thing that had kept him from being arrested. He could've easily found himself sitting in a cold jail cell. Or worse, he might've found his head separated from his body.

"Then again, he certainly doesn't seem to be enjoying himself," Rimi said.

Cho'un glared at the arrayed greens as if they'd killed his parents. He scowled at the hanging fowl like they'd stolen his wallet. And when he finally sat at a tea house, he drank tea with a terribly gloomy expression, as if ten of his friends had all met unfortunate ends at once. He eventually lifted his gaze a bit and met Rimi's gaze.

Cho'un raised an eyebrow sullenly and mumbled something. It was much too far and too noisy to hear, but she could make out the words from his lips.

Flowers for brains.

Flowers? Rimi thought. It took a moment for it to click. *That's right! He must not know who I am. When we met in Gisan, he called me a woman with flowers*

for brains. I stayed in the temple with Master Shusei, so perhaps he thinks I'm associated with the Ho House. This is the chance of a lifetime! If I play dumb, I can try to learn more about Master Cho'un's plans.

Shohi had expressed confusion about why Cho'un had come here. If they could learn more about Cho'un's intentions, they could get a better idea of what was happening in the provinces. They might even learn why Shusei was giving Cho'un his patronage.

Rimi asked the coachman to wait, left the carriage, and headed for the tea house.

II

Rimi's heart was pounding. She wondered what she should say to Kan Cho'un first. A comment on the weather? Something about the season? All sorts of inconsequential greetings spun through her mind.

This was the first time Rimi had ever walked on the market street. As she stepped into the bustling main street she'd peeked out at, she was assaulted by the noise and intensity of the people around her. She was overwhelmed and a bit frightened.

Konkokuans had a tendency to talk on and on in fast, loud voices, and it seemed that was even more true of the commoners. Even in Wakoku, Rimi had not had much contact with people. She felt the urge to curl up in a ball. If only Tama were hiding under her skirt, then she could've drawn courage from the little dragon. Unfortunately, Tama was back at the Palace of the Water Spirit.

Rimi sneezed amid the flying dust as she approached the stools lined up outside of the tea house. Steam from boiling water and the sweet scent of treats wafted from within. Cho'un blankly watched Rimi approach. Even as she came to stand in front of him, he never lifted an eyebrow. She eventually forced a smile while Cho'un continued to show no interest in doing anything but stare at her in silence.

"G-Good afternoon. Do you remember me? You let me stay the night at the temple in Gisan," Rimi said.

“Ah, the drowned rat with flowers for brains?” he said.

It was a wretched way of being remembered, but at the moment, it worked in Rimi’s favor.

“That’s me! I really appreciated your help. That’s why, umm, well, I didn’t even thank you then. I’d like to repay you somehow.”

“No need. Your companion’s done plenty. It’s thanks to him that I’m able to tour the city like this.”

Cho’un’s blunt reply flustered Rimi. Shusei had effectively saved Cho’un’s life, it was true. That was more than enough to repay the debt. Unfortunately, that didn’t help Rimi at the moment. She wouldn’t give up.

“B-But of course, Master Shusei may have repaid you, but I haven’t gotten to do anything to show my gratitude! So surely—”

“You’re related to the Ho House, aren’t you? You’re talking as if the master of your house doesn’t represent you.”

“No, no, he’s just an acquaintance! That’s all, no relation!” Rimi insisted. “That’s why I want to thank you myself!”

“Just an acquaintance. Yet despite the fact that he apparently doesn’t represent you, you speak of the head of a great family rather personally. And despite being ‘just an acquaintance,’ you two were snuggling up together in the mountains. It sounds like you two have a fairly complicated relationship, wouldn’t you say?”

Rimi flinched. Just from a few words, he’d managed to glean so many things. The rumors said he was a genius capable of being the youngest minister ever. They seemed to be true.

“But if you really want to repay me, you can buy me some yuxianmantou,” Cho’un said.

“I’d be delighted to!” Rimi said.

Cho’un surprisingly seemed interested in Rimi’s unusual circumstances. She couldn’t miss this opportunity. She rushed into the tea house and found an old man standing watch over a steamer.

“Two yuxianmantou, please!” Rimi said eagerly.

“You got it,” the old man said and pulled two of the sweet potato buns from the steamer. He wrapped them up in dried bamboo skin and handed them to Rimi. He then reached out with an empty palm.

“Six for two,” he said.

Rimi paused.

“Ah!” she cried as she felt the blood drain from her face.

Nooooo! Money! I don't have any Konkoku money!

Rimi hadn't even *touched* a coin since she'd set foot in Konkoku. Even in Wakoku, she'd never had a chance to go buy anything. Money was an alien concept to Rimi.

Suddenly, a pallid hand appeared from behind Rimi and dropped the coins into the old man's palm. While the man pocketed the money, Rimi looked back to find Cho'un standing behind her.

“I, umm, money,” Rimi said, stumbling. “I'm sorry, I forgot to bring any and—”

“Sit down and eat,” Cho'un ordered. He took a seat next to Rimi.

“I'll pay you back right away! I think the coachman has money, I could borrow some from him and—”

“Don't worry about it,” he said.

A gloom came over Rimi. She was glad she'd been able to keep Cho'un in place by offering to repay him, but he ended up being the one to treat her to the yuxianmantou. How was she ever going to get information from him while acting like such a buffoon?

“I hate to see food go to waste. Eat,” he commanded.

Rimi glumly took a bite of the bun. The gently warm, sweet scent of potato and steamed wheat filled her nose. She took another big bite out of it. It was warm, rustic, and big enough to fill both hands.

“You're someone pretty important. Important enough that you don't need to keep money on you,” Cho'un observed as he munched on his mantou. He was

watching Rimi out of the corner of his eye.

Rimi gathered her nerves.

“What brings you to Annei? I thought you lived in that temple in Gisan?” she asked.

“I’m borrowing a room there. I’m supposed to live in provided housing, but there’s a lot of coming and going there, and I don’t like noise. I’ve got business in Annei, which is why I’m here,” he explained.

Rimi found it hard to deduce anything from what he’d said, so she pressed further.

“Business? Like work?” she asked.

“Yes. My job is to protect something that’s been entrusted to me. It’s a duty that was passed on to me,”

“Passed on to you? By who?”

“By the Hero of the Countryside.”

Rimi was puzzled, unable to understand what he was saying. Cho’un was the Hero of the Countryside. She suddenly recalled her past conversation with Jotetsu. He’d heard rumors of a Hero of the Countryside when he was young. That meant there was a Hero before Cho’un, someone who went by the same name.

“When you say the Hero of the Countryside, do you mean a previous administrator of An?” Rimi asked.

“Do you know of Kan Rakusei?” he asked.

Rimi figured that was the person who shared Cho’un’s title. They had the same surname as him.

“No, I just know someone from Roko in An, and they mentioned something. Was Rakusei your father?” Rimi asked.

“No, that stubborn old man wasn’t my father. But he took care of me. He liked taking in kids without families and raising them. There are close to eighty other people out there in An with the same name saying he raised them,”

Cho'un said.

"Eighty?! He sounds incredible!"

"He wasn't. He might've had a sharp mind, but he was an idiot. Thanks to his little hobby, he couldn't even hang on to a wife, wore nothing but patchy shenyis despite being an administrator, and ate nothing but watered-down gruel. And in the end..."

Cho'un trailed off and looked out at the street. His eyes didn't move as he stared at the people passing by. It was like he was looking for something he'd lost.

He quickly shook it off and went back to munching away at the yuxianmantou. He wolfed it down in seconds, then stood up and crossed his arms, fixing Rimi with a sullen stare.

"I won't go digging around into who you actually are. But given you've got flowers where your brains should be, you don't strike me as the type to use cunning to outwit people. If you're willing to waltz right up to me in spite of that, I feel like you must be desperate. You've got something you want to protect too, am I right?" Cho'un said.

Rimi didn't know what to say to that. She realized he had seen right through her and her attempt to get information out of him. She hung her head.

"Do you have something you want to protect?" he asked in a slightly gentler voice.

"I want to protect the people who've given me somewhere to belong," she said.

"Then you and I have something in common. If you're serious about that desire, then I imagine we'll meet again. We can talk more then."

His message was clear. He wasn't interested in hearing Rimi out because of a chance encounter in the middle of the street. If she truly wanted to talk with him, she'd seek him out herself no matter the difficulties.

Of course, that's the least I could do if I want something from him. If you really need to talk to someone, you have to show it.

“Get back to your carriage,” he ordered and stepped back into the crowd with his usual gloomy expression.

Some investigator I am.

Rimi sighed at her idiocy. She wasn’t cut out for subterfuge. Even so, communicating with him like this hadn’t been a waste. She’d come away convinced of one thing.

Master Cho’un isn’t some corrupt, self-serving tyrant. There’s a kind of purity in his eyes. And he sounded so resolute when he said there was something he wanted to protect.

It was often hard to see behind Cho’un’s dour expression, but there was an honest and powerful conviction in his eyes. He had dared to oppose the emperor’s orders, but Rimi was sure he had a very good reason to do such a thing.

Rimi felt she needed to let Shohi know that. Knowing something like that could change his attitude toward Cho’un.

She hurried back to the carriage and asked the coachman to take her to the imperial palace.

Rimi decided to head for the emperor’s chambers when she arrived. If Shohi was busy in a meeting, waiting in his room would be her best option.

She passed a number of officials on her way to the Hall of the Rising Dragon. They must have thought she was just a palace woman as they passed her by with only a slight nod. There were some high-ranking officials she thought had been present at the Executive Audience, but none of them seemed to recognize Rimi as the empress-to-be. Perhaps her clothes were too different.

I’m probably never going to be able to go out by myself like this once I become empress.

Even in the rear palace, the four consorts were attended by at least one handmaid. When they left the rear palace, they would be surrounded by a number of handmaids or attendants. But the enthronement ceremony had left Rimi stuck between worlds, which allowed her a freedom she never would have

had under normal circumstances.

The long walkway was flanked by deutzias with swaying white blossoms. As the Hall of the Rising Dragon was located at the end of the walkway, the surrounding area had been left relatively bare. To make it look less spartan, huge rosewoods had been planted behind the deutzias. Their peeling bark made the trees seem ancient.

As Rimi rounded a corner, the gate leading to the Hall of the Rising Dragon came into view. Just then, someone in the shadow of a pillar reached out and grabbed her arm. The person yanked hard, which sent Rimi stumbling through the deutzias and out into the surrounding courtyard. She was then pulled behind one of the rosewoods, hidden from view of the walkway. Rimi was about to scream when the person placed a finger gently on her lips.

Her eyes widened when she realized who it was.

“Yes, that’s right, Rimi.”

His kind voice was so familiar to her. The man holding her with a finger on her lips was Shusei. Rimi’s heart leaped within her chest. Joy and fear both welled within her.

Once Shusei was sure Rimi wouldn’t cry out, he removed his finger from her lips.

“Master Shusei? Did you need something from me?” Rimi asked.

There was nothing unusual about the master of the Ho House visiting the imperial palace. But this was the first time he’d personally interacted with her within the palace since becoming their master.

“You met with Kan Cho’un before. What did you talk about? Was it planned? How did you make contact with him?” Shusei asked. His tone was as calm as ever, but something in his expression looked panicked.

What? Master Cho’un was just touring the city. Was Shusei having him monitored? Is that how he knows?

So someone was monitoring Cho’un. That person then immediately informed Shusei, who then sought out Rimi. It had all happened so fast. Was that a sign

that Shusei was nervous?

“Why do you want to know?” Rimi asked.

“Please, answer my questions,” he said.

Rimi had so many things she wanted to ask. This was another once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. She would normally have no hope of talking to Shusei, yet here he was in front of her. If she asked the right questions, maybe she could find out why he felt the need to have Cho’un monitored. That might explain why Shusei was offering protection to the administrator.

“Okay. But first, you answer my questions, Master Shusei,” Rimi said.

“I’m the one asking questions here. Answer me,” Shusei said.

“No. If you really want answers out of me, you’ll answer my—”

Rimi was suddenly cut off when Shusei grabbed her around the waist and pressed her body against the tree trunk.

“I could just kidnap you, Rimi. The grounds around the Hall of the Rising Dragon are deserted. Nobody would know what happened to you. If you don’t answer my questions, then I’m not going to be able to let you go,” Shusei whispered.

His face was so close that she could feel his breath on her, but he was completely dispassionate. There wasn’t a hint of warmth in his voice. The fear in Rimi began to grow.

“Anything I say could be a lie. What then?” Rimi said, her voice quivering.

“The same goes for me, doesn’t it?” Shusei said. “You said you have questions, but there’s no guarantee that whatever answer I give will be the truth. The difference is that I have learned in my time with the Ho House how to get the truth out of someone. I can always rely on that to get my answers. Do I have to make this unpleasant? It’s not my first choice, but...”

Shusei brought his free hand to Rimi’s cheek. She wasn’t sure if he planned to strangle her or caress her sweetly.

“If you want to ask me anything, then tell me!” Rimi shrieked, trying to swallow her fear. “Please! Why are you protecting Master Cho’un?! And if

you're protecting him, why are you having him followed?!"

Shusei suddenly laughed. He then released Rimi and took a step away.

Huh?

Rimi leaned back against the tree trunk and stared at Shusei in puzzlement.

"You're not much of a spy, are you, Rimi? You just told me everything I need to know. Namely, that you know nothing. What did you and Cho'un chat about, the weather? I'm relieved," Shusei said.

"How do you know?" Rimi said.

"Why am I protecting Cho'un? Why am I monitoring him? The fact that you're asking those questions means you know nothing about my intentions," he explained.

Rimi hung her head as the strength drained out of her. She felt like such a fool. She thought she'd made it seem like she had information. But his threats had scared her and his old kindness had softened her, which sowed chaos in her heart. She was even less adept at scheming than usual.

Tears welled in Rimi's eyes. Partially out of disgust for her own stupidity, but also out of sorrow at the idea that the once-kind Shusei had threatened her.

And yet, like Shohi, she was upset that she couldn't bring herself to hate Shusei. It was fate, destiny, or whatever else had caused this that she loathed.

Why? Why? Why did it have to be like this?

Sunlight streamed through the rosewood's leaves and fell on Rimi's face.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have scared you like that. Please don't cry," Shusei said in a kind, bewildered voice.

He offered Rimi a handkerchief. She shook her head, refusing the agarwood-scented cloth. She worried that if she took it, her love for him would outweigh the fear and awfulness she felt.

He does such cruel things. Yet he's somehow still so kind.

Shusei silently placed the handkerchief back in his pocket at Rimi's refusal.

"Go," he said.

Rimi didn't raise her head as she darted back to the walkway. As she hurried toward the Hall of the Rising Dragon, the tears she had been holding back began to overflow.

Shusei was so terrifying and yet so kind. While apologizing, he had sounded like the kind cuisinologist she once knew.

His confusing behavior only deepened the chaos she felt.



Once Rimi disappeared into the Hall of the Rising Dragon, relief washed over Shusei and he turned to leave.

That was cruel, Shusei. Even if you had a reason for it, you still frightened her. You made her cry, Shusei thought, wincing as he chastised himself.

When Cho'un had asked if he could go out into Annei that morning, Shusei could've said no. However, if Shusei refused without good reason, Cho'un might have suspected he was up to something.

And so Shusei had arranged to have Cho'un followed. If he did anything unusual, Shusei would be notified at once. In the meantime, he decided to stay in the imperial palace, where it would be quicker and easier to receive contact. While there, he had met with imperial guardsmen and ministers who viewed Shusei favorably and prepared for unexpected circumstances. So when Mars's plan didn't unfold as he originally planned, it would not end with a whimper.

Shusei hadn't explained the true goal of his plan to either Neison or Mars.

Better they know nothing. They are just pieces on the board. I only need them to stay that way.

And then, a report came to Shusei. Cho'un had met with Setsu Rimi, who immediately turned back toward the imperial palace. Truthfully, the news had caused no small measure of panic for Shusei.

Was it possible that Cho'un had already begun to grasp the bigger picture and was making contact with Shohi or Rimi?

But their meeting appears to have been a mere coincidence. It seems Rimi tried to learn something from him and failed.

Touching Rimi had been a calculated decision. The feel of her waist and the smell of her hair had spurred urges within Shusei that threatened to explode at any moment. If those urges had erupted from him, he likely would've kissed her right there and lavished her with endless whispers of how precious and lovely she was.

How surprised might the old Loveless Scholar be to see how desperately in love with Rimi I am?

A self-mocking smirk spread across Shusei's face. After all, the Loveless Scholar had never held any strong attachment toward people.

Kojin, who Shusei had always believed to be his father, never showed him any love growing up. He was more like a harsh superior than a father in the way he would discipline Shusei, order him around, and rule his life.

Yet his foster mother, Mrs. Yo, had doted on and raised Shusei. But Shusei and Mrs. Yo both knew they shared no blood, and so he felt more of a sense of indebtedness to her than anything. As a famous calligrapher and the daughter of an esteemed scholar, Mrs. Yo had taught him so much. She was more of a beloved teacher than a mother.

The Shu House has never been my place. A strict father. A teacher of a mother. She was dear to me, but I could never truly bond with her. Everything was suffocating me.

Perhaps that was why Shusei had learned to keep his emotions entirely subdued. If he remained calm and amiable, he could survive. His environment had taught him that nothing was more important than doing the correct thing in the most efficient and logical way possible. Perhaps on some unconscious level, he even dealt with people like that. It was more efficient to be amiable with others than to start creating friction.

For a man like that, serving the selfish and irritable Shohi had been an agonizing task. But at the same time, he felt attracted to Shohi's presence. He was Shusei's complete opposite, illogical and inefficient.

It's rude to think, but he was so alien to me. It was amusing.

And yet, as alien as Shohi was to Shusei, in a way, they were exactly alike.

They were both lonely and searching for something. And yes, Shohi was utterly unlike Shusei in the way he was ruled by emotion. But in supporting Shohi, Shusei found himself experiencing emotion. He felt human.

I suppose that's what it means to be changed by someone.

Rimi was similarly alien to Shusei. Not content with just following what was routine, she had something she wanted and went through every effort to obtain it. Shusei had been inspired to help her in her search for a place to belong. In his time by her side, he had been enchanted by her passion.

Behind her sweet, silly smile, there was a great strength. Perhaps it was her passion, like Shohi's, that had changed him.

Shusei had been enamored with this woman who had granted him passion, and soon he had found himself obsessed.

Shusei, always so mild-mannered, had been slowly transformed by these two alien people. He had felt Shohi's emotion and experienced Rimi's passion, and those things had begun to build and smolder inside of him. As they grew, they eventually became his own. True passion began to burn within Shusei, which pushed him to act.

Shusei looked down at his feet. When he thought of what he'd done to Rimi, it made him loathe himself. But the passion still burning inside of him would not allow him to stop.

III

Deutzias swayed in the breeze outside of Shohi's office windows. The white buds rocked back and forth while the leaves danced in the light of late spring. Shohi stared at them, entranced by their beauty.

"Your Majesty," Kojin said.

Shohi returned his attention to the table to see Shu Kojin, To Rihan, and Jin Keiyu all staring at him. Shohi hadn't been able to shake the weariness from his body and knew that was why his attention was waning. He straightened himself and tried to focus.

“Apologies. Right, our plan of action regarding Cho’un. How are the other administrators responding?” Shohi said.

“We have attempted to confirm if Cho’un truly speaks for the other prefectural administrators, but we have received no reply. They seem intent on ignoring us. Presumably, they knew about Cho’un’s visit to the capital and agreed to act as one in the aftermath. They are all in lockstep,” Rihan replied while Keiyu leafed through papers with his chin in his hand.

“Which brings us back to the main problem: we don’t know what Cho’un came here to do,” Keiyu grumbled. “Was it a declaration of war or something else? The fact that the other prefectures aren’t doing a thing makes it all the more unusual.”

“Even if we were to guess, without knowing the state of the provinces, we have no real grounds to deliver judgment,” Kojin added bitterly. “Rihan, do you have anything to report?”

Rihan shook his head.

“I’ve organized and dispatched survey teams to each province but none have delivered a comprehensive report,” Rihan said.

Bureaucrats always moved ponderously and were thorough in their investigations, prioritizing accuracy above all else. They would often double or triple check their results, meaning answers never came back quickly. So reports would be thoroughly validated, but sometimes the information would come too late. This was a perfect example. The administrators had marched right up to Shohi and declared an intent to rebel. What they needed right now wasn’t a thoroughly scrutinized report. What they needed was fast, actionable information.

Unfortunately, the more structured the organization, the harder it was to simply grab the information that was needed. They would probably hear from Jotetsu or Consort Yo far before an official report would be delivered.

“Kan Cho’un, Hero of the Countryside, hmm? What is it you’re after?” Shohi muttered.

“There was an administrator of An who went by the same name during the

reign of your predecessor. These 'Heroes of the Countryside' are never up to any good," Kojin said coldly.

"My predecessor? What do you mean?" Shohi said, turning to Kojin.

"The administrator of An two terms before Kan Cho'un. They called him 'Hero of the Countryside' as well. You don't know of him?" Rihan asked in surprise.

"Don't be ridiculous, of course he wouldn't know. His Majesty would've been five or six at the time," Keiyu said as he dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand.

"Did this former Hero do something as well? Kojin, you served my father. Do you know anything?" Shohi asked.

"I had only recently become chancellor at the time, but I was actually involved," Kojin said coolly. "An had suffered widespread flooding, which led to poor crop growth. It took years for the harvests to recover. The administrator of An asked for a tax abatement for his prefecture, but His Majesty would not hear of it. The man even threatened to use local forces to resist us."

"So, what happened?"

"He did just that and was arrested for treason. But it took over a year and a half to capture him, making it effectively impossible to gather taxes from An in the meantime. When the new administrator arrived, he found that crop harvests were nearly the same as before the floods and he was able to collect the required taxes with little trouble. He was quite confused by it. If it was that easy, why had his predecessor put up such resistance?"

"Wasn't his name Kan Rakusei?" Keiyu said.

"Kan? A relative of Kan Cho'un?" Rihan said, raising an eyebrow.

"Of course not. No blood relative of a traitor who died in prison would have made it through the appointment procedures. Kan's a common surname in An," Kojin said.

Shohi touched a finger to his lips and pondered as he listened to Kojin and the ministers talk.

The current situation clearly resembles the matter of this Kan Rakusei. Is this

an act of retaliation? But if Cho'un passed the appointment examinations, then he couldn't be a blood relative of Kan Rakusei.

A few days before, Rimi had informed Shosei that she had run into Cho'un in the city. She'd claimed she didn't get the feeling that he was driven by self-interest or seemed like the tyrannical type. She said he was driven by the desire to protect something. They were only Rimi's subjective impressions, of course. Shohi wasn't so naive as to take them at face value. But he knew that gut impressions were also something you couldn't ignore.

Everything was so ambiguous. Shohi wanted something clear and concrete.

Jotetsu, my four consorts, it's in your hands.



He makes me sick.

Yo had been fighting off the unrelenting urge to vomit.

He makes me sick. He makes me sick. He makes me sick.

Across a large table, her birth father Ma Ijun was laughing, eating, and drinking.

She was nauseated by everything. By the sight of him. By how his chopsticks never even paused as he shoveled meat and vegetables into his mouth. By the sound of his chewing. By his gulps as he sucked down entire cups of liquor.

What especially sickened Yo was the knowledge that she shared blood with this repulsive man. She wondered if maybe clawing open her own skin and squeezing out every drop of blood would make her feel better.

So sat alongside Yo, maneuvering her chopsticks with refinement. At times, Ijun would belt out a laugh and say something to her. So would cast her eyes downward and offer short answers. *Oh, yes. I suppose so. Of course.*

Still, Ijun seemed content just to have the So family's princess there before him. His smile was unwavering.

Ijun had tan skin and strong, manly eyebrows. He was quite masculine, and one might even call him sexy. But to Yo, he was repulsive.

So must have read Yo's expression because she quickly and courteously

ended the meal by announcing she was tired and needed to rest. She then nodded at Yo and pulled her to their room.

Ma Ijun's estate was located on the eastern edge of the Konkokuan metropolis of Annei. The entirety of the estate was situated on top of a moderately-sized hill with reasonable space between the buildings. Yo and So were staying in the most prestigious guest house, which was at the hill's highest point. It extended out onto a rock that jutted from the hill. There was a balcony on the rock offering a bird's-eye view of the orderly streets of Annei.

The clouds covered the moon, making the night even darker than usual. Swaying lamps hung from houses were glowing brightly. The imperial palace glowed brightest of all, especially the rear palace on the northern side.

Yo placed her cheek on the railing and gazed out into the darkness. Wind swept across the balcony, and the ensuing chill made her nausea begin to subside.

"How are you feeling? Are you quite done?" So asked primly from beside Yo. So had a tendency to act standoffish and self-important when she didn't know how to act with someone. It was her signature trait. She had likely fallen into her familiar manner because she wanted to help Yo but didn't know how.

"I'm feeling a lot better. I'm sorry, So. Whenever I'm around him, I can't help but feel ill. It's always been like that."

"I understand. I don't want to look at the man who thought he could buy me. If it's that bad, things must have been awful for you before joining the rear palace. You must have been sick every day," So said.

"Sometimes, if I really gritted my teeth, I was fine. He would never come around to see Mother and me. Apparently, Mother annoyed him," Yo said.

"That reminds me, do you really not want to see your mother?"

"It's fine. Even if she saw me, she wouldn't recognize me as her daughter. She's been calling me her 'dear friend Enrin' for a long while now. She's broken."

Yo could tell that So was surprised by the admission. Yo forced herself to cheerfully wave the concern away. Brooding wasn't in her nature.

“Don’t make that face, So! It’s really not becoming of you. Besides, it was pretty fun! Mother thinks she’s ten years old for some reason, and I got to play house with her all the time!” Yo explained. “I love playing house, so I had a good time. But once I joined the rear palace and was away from her for a while, I lost interest in it. So I’m fine with not seeing her.”

Yo had been seven when her mother “broke.” She’d never really found out what had happened or why. But there were fragments of memories that had been seared into her young mind. A man and a woman, naked and entangled. Ma Ijun’s laugh. Her mother’s pitiful voice, begging for forgiveness. Groans. Screams. Ma Ijun’s back. The sheer size of Ma Ijun’s fist. Ma Ijun. Ma Ijun. Ma Ijun. Nothing but powerful memories of him accompanied by fear and revulsion.

Yo feared Ma Ijun. She hated him. She despised everything he did. Even if what he did was perfectly reasonable for a merchant, she would loathe it. Perhaps all of that was what caused her to see every man the same way she saw him.

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t want to see Ma Ijun either. However, for His Majesty, my only choice is to suffer through it,” Yo confessed.

The emperor knew she hated men and yet had asked her to join his side anyway. It had made Yo happy. She felt seen. The emperor was a man, yet somehow, he didn’t repulse her. He had given her a place in the world. He was her place in the world, and she needed to protect him. To protect Shohi was to protect her place, so this was for her own sake as well.

So spent a few moments looking away in bewildered silence after Yo’s admission. Eventually, she cleared her throat.

“You have a splendid attitude. I offer my praise,” So said.

That stuck-up proclamation was So’s ultimate attempt at comfort. Yo, realizing that, burst out laughing.

“Thank you very much. Now that I’ve received your praise, I must perk up and fulfill my duty, mustn’t I? As a matter of fact, Ma Ijun’s going out tonight. Want to go on an adventure together?” Yo said.

“Indeed. I’d rather not stay in the man’s mansion longer than I have to.”

Under the cover of darkness, Yo and So walked through the estate with only the unreliable light of a single candle to guide them. They made their way to the building where Ma Ijun carried out his business. His subordinates gathered there constantly for discussions.

Since it wasn’t locked, it could be assumed that the building did not contain any valuables. Inside was a large table for meetings. Nearby shelves were lined with what appeared to be ledgers and contracts.

“What should we search to find out what’s happening in the provinces...?” So asked in bewilderment.

Yo began scouring the shelf for ledgers, pulling them out one by one.

“These have the names of the prefectures on them. They’re ledgers for the Ma Trade Association’s dealings in each prefecture,” Yo explained. “If we look through these, we’ll have an idea of how much trade is occurring. If there’s an irregularity in the provinces, we should be able to see— Huh?”

As Yo pulled out a ledger, she spotted another one hidden behind it. This one had the name of a prefecture on the cover along with the words “Mutual Aid Group.” There was one for each prefecture. She snatched the ledger from the shelf and began to leaf through it.

Her eyes suddenly widened.

“What is this?!”



Jotetsu smelled trouble. He was certain of it.

Even on a horse, it would take a hundred days or more to cover all five prefectures of Konkoku. Shohi hadn’t given him a time limit, but Jotetsu had estimated he’d need about seven days. With that in mind, he decided to center his search on the prefectures of An, Tei, and Ju, with a particular focus on An where the capital stood. That way, he’d minimize travel distance and be able to concentrate on the essentials.

The remaining prefectures, Bun and Kyo, were known as the Far North and

the Far South. They were vast, mostly uninhabited regions, and the people who did reside there lived close to the borders of their neighboring prefectures. That meant Jotetsu could likely judge the state of Bun and Kyo by getting a read on their neighbors.

As for An, Tei, and Ju, recent years hadn't exactly yielded unusually large crops, but the harvests were reasonable enough. There hadn't been any large-scale disasters, though heavy rain and landslides around the turn of the season had caused some damage. Nothing stood out as a reason for the economic downturn.

However, the citizens, and especially the farmers, were having a hard time getting by. Towns were overflowing with people coming from farming communities to find work. But the towns weren't showing any economic improvement either, and there were a lot of jobless people living on the street.

It normally shouldn't be this hard to find a living.

Jotetsu had investigated An, Tei, and Ju. He was now spurring his horse straight back to Annei. The sun was red and ripe in the sky as it descended behind a mountain. The mountain ridge glistened like it was melting.

Jotetsu was prepared to ride through the night. He needed to return with news from the provinces but that wasn't the only thing that hastened him. He'd heard a certain rumor and observed movements by the prefectural governments that centered around the administrators.

Kan Cho'un, Hero of the Countryside, had gone to the emperor seeking compassion for the people of the provinces. For that, he'd been imprisoned and was about to be executed.

Surprisingly, the rumor was being spread around as truth. And seemingly in response to the rumor, the prefectural militias were preparing to mobilize. Once they received the order, they would likely march on Annei, seeking to save the man who fought for their interests.

Depending on how His Majesty handles it, if the prefectural forces begin to move, it could turn into full-blown rebellion.

So why on earth were rumors spreading about Cho'un's arrest and execution?

Given how fast the rumors were spreading and the fact that the provincial governments and administrators were taking them at face value, the answer seemed clear: someone was deliberately spreading false information.

Wait, don't tell me it's him. But why? What would be the point?

A face crossed Jotetsu's mind, one of the shrewdest men that Jotetsu had ever known. If he had turned his mind to plotting, things would likely move slowly, but they would move nonetheless. And not in a way that was good for Shohi.

Chapter 5: The Victory of the Four Lotuses

I

“Virtuous Consort Ho truly intends to return to the Ho House? She’s certainly a brave one,” Shusei said.

A servant had delivered the news, and Shusei now smiled grimly as he assembled the drafted letters on his desk. He had an idea of what Consort Ho was up to, which meant Shusei would need to act normally, attempt to keep her in the guest house as much as possible, and have her return to the rear palace at just the right moment.

I suppose I don’t need this anymore, Shusei thought as he tore one of the drafts in half. A more official version of it had already been sent to each of the five administrators in his name as the master of the Ho House.

Shusei wondered how the news would be received by the other four administrators and the interim administrator of An.

I imagine they’ll believe me.

The odds were in Shusei’s favor. The other administrators, especially An’s, must have been holding their breath as Kan Cho’un made his way to the capital. They were surely in agony as they waited for news.

But no word had come from Cho’un or the capital. They would naturally assume something had happened to him. Upon receiving a confidential letter with news from the head of the Ho House, they would have no other option but to believe it. They would jump at the news while their impatience and anxiety smothered any doubts as to why the Ho House was the one sending the news. It was human nature.

I’ll need to dispose of these as well.

Shusei tore up five sealed letters that had been piled on his desk. They were addressed to each of the five administrators, Cho’un’s substitute included, and

signed in Kan Cho'un's name. His face was blank as he disposed of them.

With his business finished, Shusei picked up a lantern and left his chambers. It was his duty as master of the Ho House to greet Consort Ho and her party as guests.

When Shusei thought about seeing Ho and On's faces, he found himself thinking of Rimi and the time they had passed together in the Hall of Northern Peaks before the Declaration of Stability. As the bliss from that time blossomed inside of Shusei once more, he found it a bit difficult to breathe.

As Shusei was navigating the dark, complex walkways leading to the outer buildings of the estate, he heard someone call out to him. He looked back to see that someone had stepped out from the shadows of the walkway, and his brow furrowed when he realized who it was.

"Did I not ask you to stay away from our estate? No one must know that you're collaborating with the Ho House, Ma Ijun."

Ma Ijun, the man with tanned skin and thick, rugged eyebrows. He let out a boisterous laugh.

"No need to be so cold, Master Shusei! It looks like your plan's a success," Ijun said with a conspiratorial smile.

"By which you mean..." Shusei said.

"I got word from the Mutual Aid Group this morning. The walls are closing in on His Majesty," Ijun said.

A small tremble raced down Shusei's spine.

Finally, His Majesty will—

Shusei suddenly felt someone's gaze from the other end of the walkway. He turned to see a flicker of light just as it turned the corner. It was Ho and On being led by a handmaid with a lantern.

Damn! Did they see us?

Plants flanked the walkway, but it seemed that they could've been able to see Shusei and Ijun from where they were. Their eyes were wide as if they had just seen something unbelievable. The moment that they realized Shusei had

noticed their presence, they signaled the handmaid and rushed back to the guest house.

“Get out of here at once,” Shusei spat at Ijun. He then chased after the consorts.



“What could this mean?! Ma Ijun and the cuisinologist?!” On cried out in fright as they rushed back into the guest house.

Ho slammed the door shut behind them. Her shoulders heaved as she tried to catch her breath.

“I don’t know,” Ho said, shaking her head. She placed her hands and forehead against the door as she tried to think. “I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of this.”

The handmaid looked back and forth between the consorts in puzzlement, unable to understand what was going on.

Ma Ijun petitioned His Majesty, claiming the administrators’ corruption was driving the provinces to ruin. Then Kan Cho’un appeared and declared that the administrators would not be sending any tax money to the central government.

Having heard about the strange happenings in the provinces from Ma Ijun, His Majesty and the others had naturally thought that Cho’un should be arrested and punished.

But the cuisinologist put a stop to that...

Ma Ijun had effectively called for the punishment of the administrators. Yet here he was, walking around the very house that had protected the representative of those same administrators. What could it mean?

“Something is wrong. We need to let His Majesty know,” Ho mumbled.

Just as she spoke, a thud shook the door that she was using to support herself. Ho pulled away, but only silence followed. Fearfully, she reached out to open the door and see what was outside.

However, the door would not open. The color drained from Ho’s face. She shook and yanked the door, but it appeared to be locked from the outside. She

could barely make it budge.

“You’re joking. He’s locked us in.”



Shohi’s appetite had drastically waned after Jotetsu and the consorts had departed on their missions.

“Your Majesty, your food is getting cold.”

On the table sat vibrantly colorful stir-fried greens as well as pork deep-fried in potato starch and drizzled in sweet vinegar. They were accompanied by a jitang-based egg tang and smooth, sweet agar gelatin. They were all stone cold.

Shohi had been endlessly busy recently, but Rimi still needed to bring Tama for him to see, so she continued to visit him in order to carry out her duty.

Despite it being lunchtime, Shohi was still at his desk, looking over papers.

“Oh, Rimi. Do you have the Quinary Dragon with you? I’m going to eat once I’ve finished looking this over,” Shohi said.

From the look of him, I don’t think he’s been eating at all. No wonder the Chief of Dining is worried about him.

Shohi had recently been spending endless hours in meetings with Kojin and the others, demanding even the slightest bit of new information be brought to him, no matter the time of day. It left him with no time dedicated entirely to eating, and he would often be called away the moment he picked up his chopsticks.

Things had gone on like this for three days. Chief of Dining Yo Koshin, who prepared the emperor’s meals, was growing worried. If the emperor collapsed from malnutrition while Koshin was doing his best as Chief of Dining, it would harm his good name. He’d recently slipped Rimi a letter asking if he could do anything to improve His Majesty’s meals.

His Majesty had unsurprisingly lost his appetite as well. Cho’un was still strutting around in the Ho House’s care and his treasonous declaration to the emperor continued to go unaddressed. The situation could explode at any moment, and Shohi, Kojin, and the other ministers were in a panic wondering if

they were going to handle it in time.

And in addition to everything else, Shohi had tasked Jotetsu and his consorts with enormous duties. Anyone would have a hard time working up an appetite under such pressure.

Living creatures are innately edgy before conflict, so a loss of appetite is natural.

Rimi had also been suffering from a poor appetite. Ever since her meeting with Shusei a few days before, she had felt something nagging at her, as if she was missing something important. She wasn't even sure what it was about. It was so frustratingly hazy.

Tama leaped from Rimi's shoulder down to the table and sniffed at the food. When she realized the food had gone cold, her whiskers drooped down to the table in disappointment.

Perhaps Shohi had noticed Rimi's worry as he quickly finished skimming his document. He then came to the table and picked up his chopsticks. He ate a bite of greens, a slice of meat, and a spoonful of tang before putting his chopsticks down as if he was satisfied with just that. There was no gusto in how he ate.

"That's enough. Take it away," he said.

As Rimi stood beside Shohi, she noticed how thin his neck looked.

"That's all you want? Aren't you hungry? You're going to waste away! Here, let me. Say 'aaah!'" Rimi said.

"Do not mock me! Do you think I am a child?! That I am sickly?!" Shohi immediately snapped at her.

Rimi, ignoring his refusal, picked up the chopsticks and grabbed some of the greens.

"You're too big to be a child and too rosy to be sickly. Now come on, eat up," Rimi insisted.

Shohi groaned and flushed red with embarrassment. He felt like he wanted to be fed by Rimi, but his logical self was putting up a fight.

“Who do you think I am?” Shohi said.

“Huh? You’re the emperor, right?” Rimi said.

“That you would treat the emperor like this is...actually rather impressive.”

“Yes, it is. Now come on, eat up.”

Shohi seemed to grow even redder as Rimi smiled playfully, but he didn’t seem to hate this treatment. He looked around in concern, checking to make sure nobody was around, then brought his mouth toward the chopsticks in Rimi’s hands. He seemed embarrassed and hesitant as his lips touched the greens.

“Your Majesty!”

It was Hakurei, uncharacteristically flustered as he burst into the room.

Shohi nearly fell out of his chair in panic while Rimi looked back at the doorway in confusion, chopsticks still in hand.

“Wh-What is it?!” Shohi said. He immediately straightened up and squared his shoulders, trying to hide his embarrassment. Hakurei might ordinarily have grinned and poked a bit of fun at Shohi, but he was also in a panic. Hakurei bowed and immediately began to explain.

“Consorts Yo and So have returned to the rear palace. They both appear to be very stressed and tired, but it seems they have something urgent to report. I was worried that bringing them here might have been too much for them.”

“They’ve returned sooner than expected. But if they’re in such a state that you’re worried about them, then something must have happened. I will go to the rear palace,” Shohi said.

Rimi rushed after Shohi and Hakurei as they went to leave.

“Let me join you! I’m worried about them!” Rimi said.

Shohi allowed Rimi to come along, and she followed closely behind the emperor as Hakurei led them to the rear palace.

The consorts were both resting in the Palace of Great Purity where Yo resided. The handmaids were flustered by the emperor’s sudden appearance

and began running around in a panic.

Shohi was led to a living room with an open door that faced out to the yard. So and Yo were both waiting for him, looking far more ragged than usual.

Where are Yo's hairpins? And So usually has flowers in her hair.

Apparently, they had dressed in a hurry. They must have been in a rush to get out of Ma Ijun's estate. Perhaps they had to make an escape?

So and Yo both bowed. When they raised their heads, Rimi noticed their faces were completely white. Yo especially seemed to be fighting the urge to vomit. Where was the cheerful, ever-bubbly Yo? Rimi wanted to rush over to Yo and help her, but it didn't feel like the right time.

"I'm glad to see you've returned safely, my consorts," Shohi said.

"Thank you," So said tearfully.

"I'm surprised to see you back so soon. Were you able to find enough information at Ijun's to help understand the situation?" Shohi asked.

So gathered her nerve and straightened herself up.

"We have both learned of the situation in the provinces and have confirmed something dreadful," So said firmly. She breathed in deeply and steeled herself before continuing. "The local economies of the provinces are indeed suffering. The cause is the Mutual Aid Group, a merchant organization that has remained in the shadows."

"Mutual Aid Group?"

"It appears to be an organization established to perform trade that the Ma Trade Association can't publicly associate with. The goal of the Mutual Aid Group is to unfairly drive down the cost of crops and goods. Because the Group applies pressure on all merchants, not even the administrators can see that the prices are being manipulated. The Fund then hoarded the deflated goods and waited for prices to rise again in order to sell at a profit," So explained. "The availability of goods has fallen, prices have soared, and the people's income has been unjustly suppressed. It has left the people destitute. And the one who has thrown the provinces into chaos is none other than Ma Ijun."

Ma Ijun had been the one to petition Shohi directly. He had asked him to rein in the administrators and their corruption. He had said the financial disaster in the provinces was affecting the merchants as well. But according to So, he himself was the one driving the provinces to poverty. The man who had pleaded for an end to the chaos was the one who had sown it in the first place.

Rimi was dumbfounded as she came to grasp the situation. Shohi's mouth also hung agape, but he suddenly looked up.

"That's ridiculous. Ijun came to plead for relief from the chaos he himself caused? And he came directly to me for an audience. An audience he would never normally be allowed. For what?" Shohi asked.

A face flashed in Rimi's mind. A grumpy man speaking calmly about duty and something he had to protect. It was Cho'un, the administrator. His duty was as an administrator. He wanted to protect the wonderful peace of the land that had been entrusted to him.

"Maybe he wanted to trouble the administrators?" Rimi murmured to herself. "And he succeeded in that, so they sent Master Cho'un to the capital as their representative. Their announcement that they wouldn't be issuing taxes to the central government must have been because they had no other option."

That was why Cho'un had come directly before Shohi. Because he was in truly dire circumstances. He made such a bold declaration to Shohi in hopes that the emperor would turn his attention to the situation in the provinces.

But His Majesty, the chancellor, and everyone else immediately accused him of treason.

That could have been because Ma Ijun had complained about the "tyranny of the administrators" first. It was a reasonable reaction, considering what they'd been told.

But was it really so reasonable?

If an administrator suddenly did something absurd, the first reaction might have been panic but not treason. They'd demand a serious explanation.

If not for the prior information... But surely they hadn't planned that far ahead? Still, a frightening thought occurred to Rimi.

What if Ijun's plea regarding the tyranny of the administrators was intended to plant that very idea in people's minds?

"But what would Ma Ijun have to gain from troubling the administrators?" Shohi said.

"If this were to result in conflict between the central and provincial governments, it would destabilize your reign," Hakurei calmly explained. "Ma Ijun might not stand to personally gain from that. But if someone with an interest in seeing your reign suffer were to conspire with him..."

The words struck Rimi like a blow to the head. Shohi gasped.

"The Ho House. Shusei?!"

II

Shusei had said he would do what was desired of him as a child of Ho Seishu. Did that mean plotting to destabilize Shohi's reign? If that was the case, it would explain why Shusei would shelter Kan Cho'un.

Cho'un and the others, driven into a corner by Ma Ijun, could defy Shohi, claiming that they could take no more. With the provinces and the central government opposed, the Ho House could play innocent and ally with the provinces.

They had put Cho'un up against a wall only to whisper in his ear, bringing him into the fold to use for their own purposes.

Although "the provinces" seemed to imply some far-off place, anything outside of the capital city Annei could be called part of the provinces. They held enormous power. Enough that they could fight equally against the throne.

Rimi shuddered at the meticulousness of the plan.

"Forgive me," Yo suddenly mumbled.

She was gripping her skirt with both hands and looking at the ground as her small body trembled. Rimi, shocked by the sight, couldn't stop herself from rushing to Yo's side to support her.

“What’s the matter, Yo?” she said.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty,” Yo said again. It was like she didn’t even notice Rimi holding her. She was gripping her skirt so tightly that her fingers were completely white. “My father has threatened your reign. My father, *that man*, he... As his daughter, I cannot remain in the rear palace. I deserve to be punished alongside him. I do not want to be punished, but there is no other option. Though I can’t stand the idea of being punished for his crimes...”

Shohi stared blankly at the trembling consort for a moment but finally took a small step toward her. When he did, So stepped in front of Yo as if to protect her.

“Your Majesty, Pure Consort Yo is a daughter of the Yo house now. I do not see any reason to treat her as the child of Ma Ijun,” So said.

“But Yo herself knows she is the daughter of Ma Ijun, does she not? She is only a child of the Yo family in a technical sense. Ijun’s blood flows within her. Even if I pardoned her on the technicality of being a member of the Yo family, it would hold no meaning,” Shohi said flatly.

He gently pushed So out of the way, leaving him standing in front of Yo once more.

Please be kind to her, Your Majesty, Rimi thought as she gazed pleadingly at Shohi.

“Raise your head,” Shohi commanded Yo as she trembled before him.

Yo raised her head timidly but couldn’t bring herself to look Shohi in the eyes. Her gaze wandered, avoiding the emperor.

“We both know that the blood of Ma Ijun flows within you. You could claim you have no relationship with him as you’ve been adopted, but the truth remains, and you know that. Am I wrong?”

“No,” said Yo in a tiny voice. She had gone completely pale.

Shohi reached out and placed his hand on Yo’s cheek. She flinched at the touch. However, when she realized that all he had done was place his soft palm upon her cheek, she blinked repeatedly and looked him in the eyes. Shohi gave

a kind and somewhat exasperated smile.

“But what does that even mean?” Shohi asked. “You are Yo Enrin. You and he lead different fates. Even if you do share blood, I don’t see a trace of Ijun in you. Even though you are father and child, you lead different lives as different people. The child of a wise king is not always a wise king. The child of a foolish king is not always a foolish king. They are different people. Even as his child, I do not think my father was a wise man. But I also believe that I am not him. You are not Ijun, and as such, I have no interest in charging you with his crimes.”

Though Shohi spoke in a powerful, stern voice, there was a sympathetic and encouraging tone behind it. Tears quickly began to well in Yo’s eyes.

“I am not going to pardon you because you have been adopted by the Yo house,” Shohi continued. “You are indeed the daughter of Ma Ijun, but that has no bearing on your present personality, character, or thoughts. It has nothing to do with you. You are not Ma Ijun, and there is no need to either pardon or not pardon you. On the contrary, you have played a central part in uncovering Ijun’s schemes. You have my praise.”

So breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed her shoulders.

Yo was dumbfounded for a moment, but suddenly burst into tears and threw herself against Rimi, who held her tightly.

Shohi looked away, embarrassed by Yo’s loud outpouring of tears.

“I’m just stating the obvious. Stop crying,” he commanded.

Rimi was so happy. Not just happy that Yo wouldn’t be charged with any crimes, but also happy that Shohi had decided not to charge her.

Just then, a dove flew across the Palace of Great Light’s yard.

Was that a bird? I think it was a dove.

Hakurei’s expression shifted. He excused himself and left the room. Suddenly, Rimi remembered. It was the dove Hakurei had sent with Ho as an emergency form of communication.





The dove had been given to Hakurei by an old eunuch who had spent many years in the rear palace. Usually, when the lower ranking eunuchs reached a certain age and could no longer physically perform their duties, they were released from service. However, the eunuch in question was skilled at caring for animals, especially healing sick and injured ones. Since many of the consorts had dogs, cats, and fish, being able to look after their pets was a useful talent that allowed him to stay in the rear palace despite his considerable age. He had been in the rear palace since Hakurei was a boy. The man had always been a kind and quiet lover of animals.

It's such a lovely bird. Let me give it to you, he had said.

It had happened the year prior, right around Shohi's ascension. The eunuch had suddenly and inexplicably given the bird to Hakurei, who had been surprised by the suddenness of the action. Frankly, Hakurei had felt annoyed back then. However, over time, Hakurei came to understand the old man's compassionate gesture.

Though the old eunuch had never said anything, he must have been pained by Hakurei's history and kept watch over him. Hakurei had spent his life filled with hatred and sadness. When Shohi had ascended to the throne, Hakurei's feelings had erupted and driven him to release the Quinary Dragon. The old eunuch must have had some idea of how Hakurei felt. He had given him the beautiful dove as a message.

Look to the sky. Even above the rear palace, the sky is wide and blue. You can still fly if you so wish.

"I knew it."

As Hakurei entered his chambers, he was greeted by the sight of an open window on the other side of the room. Perched on the round window's frame was the dove. Hakurei rushed over to the bird and found a small piece of paper tied around its leg. He hurriedly removed the paper and unraveled it.

His expression grew darker with each word he read. When he had finished reading it, he rushed out of the room with the message clutched tightly in hand. He hurried to the Palace of Great Light but found that he had narrowly missed the emperor. Consort So informed Hakurei that Shohi had returned to his

chambers with Rimi and summoned Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu to discuss Yo's news.

Perfect. That means Shu Kojin and the ministers will already be there.

Hakurei left the rear palace in pursuit of Shohi. He was making his way to the Hall of the Rising Dragon when someone suddenly called out to him.

Standing off to the side of the walkway was Jotetsu, dressed in filthy traveling attire. The soldier pushed his way through the foliage and climbed up onto the walkway.

"Already back, Jotetsu? You've chosen a strange route for a walk," Hakurei said.

"It's my clothes. The bureaucrats don't like how I'm dressed, apparently. Gotta sneak my way into His Majesty's room," Jotetsu explained.

"I assume you have a reason for appearing in front of His Majesty dressed like that?"

"No time. Thing is, I've got something pretty big," Jotetsu said quietly. "And what brings you His Majesty's way? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Consorts Ho and On may be in danger."



It was not long after Shohi and Rimi had arrived in the emperor's living room that Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu appeared as well. They had already been informed of the existence of Ma Ijun's "Mutual Aid Group."

"That explains it," Rihan spat. His grimace made the scar under his right eye contort. "That's why neither we nor the administrators could find a reason for the economic downturn."

"That makes things a whole lot simpler. Good news for you, eh, Rihan? All you have to do is dig up information on this Mutual Aid Group and you'll be able to throw Ijun in jail," Keiyu said, giving Rihan a friendly clap on the shoulder. "Then we just need to improve the economic situation in the provinces and the administrators should fall in line."

"Stop," Rihan said, brushing Keiyu's hand away.

“And here I thought we were friends,” Keiyu whined. The little exchange was likely Keiyu’s best attempt at cheering Rihan up.

“Do you have any evidence that this Mutual Aid Group exists, Your Majesty?” Kojin asked while glaring at his subordinates’ antics.

Shohi nodded.

“Pure Consort Yo returned with a number of ledgers belonging to the Mutual Aid Group. If we have the Ministry of Personnel examine them, we should be able to get a clear idea of what exactly they’ve been doing in the provinces,” Shohi said.

“Then we should hurry and gather officials that specialize in accounting so they can examine it. Rihan, that shouldn’t take long to put together, right?” Kojin said.

“Not at all. I’ll take care of it,” Rihan said and turned to leave the room.

“Please, Minister of Finance, if you could wait a moment,” someone said from the entrance of the room.

It was Hakurei. Jotetsu was accompanying him, dressed in travelers’ garb.

“Master Jotetsu?!” Rimi cried.

Jotetsu gave a small wave in greeting. While Shohi rushed to his side, Keiyu scooted over to Rimi.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t seen him in a while. Where’d he get off to?” Keiyu whispered.

“His Majesty ordered him to investigate the provinces. He believed that Jotetsu could operate more quickly than the team from the Ministry of Finance. It was the first move that he wanted to make while waiting to receive a more detailed report from the ministry,” Rimi explained.

“I see. So he could act more quickly, eh? It’s true, if he sat around and waited, the information might end up coming too late. Rihan’s uptight about that sort of thing. His Majesty’s more flexible. Sloppy, maybe, but still,” Keiyu responded with a combination of amusement and surprise in his voice.

Everything seemed to amuse the Minister of Rites. He didn’t take anything

seriously. It was like he saw everything from a distant, oblique angle. He was just as strange as Chancellor Shu but in an entirely different way.

“I’m glad to see you safe, Jotetsu. Tell me what you learned,” Shohi commanded. His face looked concerned because he seemed to sense the brutality of Jotetsu’s journey from his filthy clothes.

Jotetsu kneeled.

“I know you ordered me to investigate the state of the provinces, Your Majesty, but that will have to wait. There is something urgent you need to know. Soldiers from all five prefectures have mobilized and formed a coalition army. They currently march for Gokogen. I expect them to arrive tomorrow at the latest,” Jotetsu said.

Everyone went pale.

“Why would the prefectural armies be coming here?!” Rihan demanded.

“They appear to be marching to Cho’un’s rescue. They falsely believe that he has been imprisoned and faces execution. I think that misinformation is being spread intentionally,” Jotetsu explained. “The government of An and the other administrators should have been notified that the Ho House is sheltering Cho’un, yet for some reason, people are saying the opposite.”

Gokogen was a field that stretched across a gently sloping hill to the south of Annei. If an army was marching there, it could only mean one thing: they were preparing to assault the city.

Prefectural soldiers? An army? Does that mean a battle is about to happen?

The color drained from Rimi’s face as she realized the gravity of the situation.

“I wanted to warn you of things before they happened, but they began to march right as I was about to return,” Jotetsu continued. “I give us no more than half a day to prepare. But half a day is better than nothing. I’d guess the imperial soldiers garrisoned outside of Annei will have noticed by now and will be in a panic. They will inform the general, and I imagine you and the chancellor will receive an official report sometime tonight.”

Nobody knew what to say. The sheer size of the news had stunned everyone

into momentary silence.

“I have even more pressing news from the rear palace,” Hakurei said, using the silence to cut in. He handed the small note to Shohi. “Consort Ho has used a bird to send an emergency message. She and Consort On witnessed Shusei and Ijun meeting.”

Shohi frowned as he read the note.

“Why would they tell us with a note? Have they not returned to the rear palace?” Shohi asked.

“They have not,” Hakurei said. “The note does not mention why, but I had her take the bird to notify me in case there was an emergency. They may have been detained. If Ijun has allied with the Ho House, they would want to keep that news from coming out.”

Yo and On have been detained?!

“And they didn’t call for help?!” Shohi shouted. He seemed to be as surprised as Rimi.

“It appears they only thought to inform you of the truth, Your Majesty.”

Ho was strong and brilliant, and On was calm and clever. There was no way the two of them had simply forgotten to call for help. They had intentionally kept news of their imprisonment from Shohi so as not to burden him. They must have planned to handle things themselves.

“So all of this is a scheme by the Ho House and Shusei?” Kojin groaned.

Thanks to Yo and So, they had learned that Ma Ijun had used his Mutual Aid Group to disrupt the local economies in the provinces. But the one pulling Ijun’s strings was the Ho House. It was only conjecture, of course, but the news from Ho and On was enough to confirm it. Thanks to the actions of the Four Lotuses, the full picture was coming into view.

“I assume Shusei was also the one distributing misinformation to the prefectural armies,” Kojin said. He wore his usual composed expression, but his fists were clenched tightly. It was a rare display from the typically dispassionate man.

The prefectural forces had clearly believed the false report since they were on the move. Cho'un had come as representative for all the administrators, so he surely would've reported back to them with news. Yet he obviously hadn't. There was always the chance that Cho'un had simply neglected to, but Rimi didn't believe it.

Cho'un seemed like the type to take his responsibilities seriously. That's exactly why he decided to meet with His Majesty directly. There's no way someone like him wouldn't send a letter or report or anything.

Which meant his report was being intercepted. And the only one who could do that was the person protecting Cho'un: Shusei. He was the only one who could deliver news that Cho'un had been arrested and was facing execution.

It was beyond audacious, but as long as he had control of Cho'un, he could keep anyone from finding out the truth. It was all part of his plan.

Shohi, who had been staring at the crumpled note, looked up. He seemed resolute.

"I'll go. I will go to the Ho House."

III

Shohi's sudden announcement shocked everyone. Even the eternally stoic Kojin widened his eyes.

"Kojin, meet with the general of the imperial guards and prepare a strategy. Then ready the troops to move. We expect the prefectural forces to deploy in Gokogen, so we need to keep them in check. However, the goal is not to engage. We only want to keep the prefectural forces from moving. Once the fires of war start burning, there will be no putting them out," Shohi ordered.

"Please wait, Your Majesty. Of course, your orders are reasonable, and I believe it is the correct way to begin. But this is a moment of crisis. Why would you go to the Ho House without issuing any other orders?" Kojin asked.

"Because we don't have the pieces we need. Shusei's seen to that," Shohi said.

“Even so, what do you hope to gain by marching into the Ho House?! You cannot let yourself become desperate!” Kojin exclaimed.

“I am not desperate!” Shohi roared and kicked over the sofa. His patience had reached his limit. However, he placed his hands on a table and began taking long, deep breaths. He seemed to be trying desperately to control himself and keep his frustration from driving him forward blindly. When he finally raised his head, he glared at Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu.

“If we lack the right pieces, it just means we need to take them back. And I am the only one who can do that. Consorts Yo and On are being detained on the Ho estate, but that actually works in our favor. If I go to the Ho House under the pretense of collecting them, I can enter with seemingly peaceful intent,” Shohi explained. “If I come with the intent of gathering my consorts, the Ho House will be unable to deny me. Cho’un should be there too. When I leave with Yo and On, I will bring him with me. If Cho’un will lend me his ear and come to see the truth, he himself will likely order the prefectural army to withdraw.”

The most pressing matter was stopping the army from marching on the capital. Cho’un was a vital piece of that puzzle. If he could be persuaded, the military issue could be handled with a single message. With the prefectural forces withdrawing, they would be able to take their time exposing Ma Ijun’s Mutual Aid Group and fixing the provincial economies.

“And that is why I’m going. Besides, Ho and On entered the Ho House for my sake. It’s my responsibility to bring them back,” Shohi said.

Jotetsu furrowed his brow.

“But why does it have to be you? Why not just send someone else? What about Director Hakurei?” Jotetsu asked.

“The master of the Ho House is first rank. They would be within their rights to refuse anyone but me. Shusei would simply ignore whoever we sent and send them away,” Shohi said.

“Why not send Jotetsu or Kunki in secret and have them escape with the consorts and Cho’un?” Hakurei suggested.

Shohi shook his head.

“A dog or cat would be one thing, but three people, consorts included? It’s another story entirely. Jotetsu?”

“He’s right. Ho and On will probably be under surveillance. It’d be pretty impossible. Plus, it could be dangerous for the escapees too,” Jotetsu said.

“And what happens if they just kill you the moment you enter, Your Majesty?” Keiyu asked. He was grinning, but the pointed look in his eyes stood in stark contrast to his expression.

“If Shusei wants me dead, it’s because he wants to be emperor. If I die in the Ho House, it would be clear to all that I was assassinated in a play for the throne. The Ho House’s eager puppets might not mind, but nobody else would bow to a power-hungry murderer. Even if he does want the throne, Shusei would choose something more clever.”

“You say you’re going to bring Cho’un back, but how do you plan on doing that?” Rihan said sharply.

“Well...”

Shohi was suddenly at a loss for words. He apparently hadn’t worked out a concrete plan.

“I’ll go with His Majesty! While we’re there, I can search for Master Cho’un! He and I have met before!” Rimi interjected. She remembered eating yuxianmantou with him in the city. “I’m sure he’ll listen to me. I’ll persuade him to leave the Ho House and come to the palace!”

Cho’un had said if Rimi sought him out, no matter the difficulty, he would hear her out. If Rimi explained who she was and entered the Ho House despite the danger, he would surely meet with her.

“And what makes you think you’re capable of that, Setsu Rimi?” Kojin said with a cold glare. It was clear he wanted something more than bold declarations.

“I met Master Cho’un when I stayed at the temple in Gisan and once more in Annei. The second time, I tried to find out why he was provoking His Majesty, but he wouldn’t even talk to me. However, he did say something to me then. ‘If you really have something you want to protect, then I’m sure we’ll meet again.

We can talk more then.’ I believe he meant if I really try to seek him out, he’ll talk to me,” Rimi said. “I think he came to petition His Majesty directly because he is distressed by the situation in the provinces. I think he is a just man, and I trust his word.”

Kojin exchanged looks with Rihan and Keiyu, and the three seemed to reach a silent accord. It was not a perfect plan, but it was the only one they had.

“Will you be able to stand before Shusei and demand the return of your consorts, Your Majesty? You will have to find a way to give Setsu Rimi the time to find and convince Kan Cho’un as well,” Kojin said.

Shusei had been like a brother to Shohi, and his betrayal had shocked the emperor deeply. Rather than hate, all Shohi could feel was grief. Kojin clearly doubted whether Shohi would be able to stand up to Shusei.

But Shohi nodded without hesitation.

“Of course. I have to protect myself,” Shohi said. It appeared he had come to realize that his existence gave others a place in the world.

Shohi turned to Rimi.

“Will you come with me, Rimi?” he asked in a calm, steady voice.

“But Your Majesty!” Kojin interjected. The chancellor was still not convinced. “If something were to happen to you—”

“Relax. As long as I’m with His Majesty, nobody will lay a finger on him,” Jotetsu said, standing up to cut off Kojin. He turned to Shohi and smirked. “Don’t forget, your blade’s got a sharp edge.”

Shohi nodded at Jotetsu’s encouraging words.

“Prepare a large carriage and a team of riders at once! I make for the Ho House!” Shohi called out to the attendant in the next room.

A messenger immediately rushed off to the Ho House and Shohi was soon on his way out of the palace.

They were escorted by a large team of guards to the Ho estate, but only Rimi, Hakurei, Jotetsu, and Kunki were permitted to enter the grounds with Shohi.

The estate was an intricate network of walkways shrouded by lush, leafy bamboo plants, leaving barely any view of the grounds themselves. With buildings scattered across the dimly lit site, it was difficult to grasp the layout of the estate at a glance. It was a perfect example of the Ho House's cautious nature.

This is not nearly enough people for His Majesty's protection. He would usually never be able to go out like this. But this is the Ho House, so we don't have a choice.

The Ho House was equal in rank to the Ryu House, so even though Shohi was the emperor, it was natural for them to not allow a display of force. Even so, Shohi and his team were effectively in enemy territory. Four people were not enough to ensure the emperor's safety.

Rimi felt especially helpless with Tama waiting back in her room.

It would be a disaster if Tama were to run after Master Shusei while we're here.

After the events in Gisan, Rimi had decided to take precautions. It hadn't happened since then, but Tama seemed to respond to Shusei for some reason. Rimi wasn't sure why.

Tama is a divine dragon. She gives the emperor strength to rule the land.

A possibility occurred to Rimi, but she shook her head sharply.

It couldn't be. There's no way.

The main hall seemed to be near the center of the estate. It was the one place not hidden by bamboo. Instead, a neatly landscaped courtyard surrounded it.

A steward was leading the way for Shohi with Rimi following and Hakurei close behind her. Jotetsu and Kunki walked side-by-side, bringing up the rear.

The steward helped them navigate the twisting walkways, and they eventually arrived at the main hall. A thick curtain hung in the entrance, which the steward pulled aside. He bowed and ushered them inside.

Black lacquered pillars, ornamented with gold and silver, lined the hall. The ceiling was a field of panels. Moutan and garden peonies, carp and monkeys,

each panel bore an intricately painted display. The entire space exuded majesty and magnificence. It was like a miniature reproduction of the Hall of New Harmony.

A great black table with mother-of-pearl inlays sat at the center of the expansive room. Seats were placed around it.

And there at the entrance, the master of the Ho House waited for them with a smile.

Master Shusei.

Right on cue, Rimi's heart began to pound at the sight of his usual, kind smile. It was their first meeting since that time beneath the rosewood. The man who had schemed to drive Shohi into a corner was right in front of her. His cruel scheme disgusted Rimi, and she could feel the fear beginning to rise inside of her.

But...

The old kindness remained in Shusei. It had led him to give Rimi all of the lullaby lilies he'd collected and to offer her a handkerchief when she was crying. The strange disparity had left Rimi confused.

For you, he had written in such elegant characters. *Please don't cry*, he had said in such a confusingly kind voice. In spite of her fear and disgust, when she remembered those things, the same old longing bloomed within her.

Rimi was sure Shusei's smile was fake and that he was just a calculating schemer intent on crushing Shohi. Not a shred of his old feelings for her remained. When Rimi considered things logically, it seemed obvious.

But once again, a feeling emerged within her. It was the sense that she was missing something vital.

"I am astonished that you would grant us a visit, Your Majesty," Shusei said.

Shohi's face was unreadable as he watched Shusei give a courteous bow. Hakurei's pointed wariness was uncharacteristically apparent on his face while Jotetsu and Kunki both wore stern expressions.

"Please, have a seat," Shusei said. He acted as if Shohi were the only person in

the room, but when Rimi's eyes met Shusei's, he gave the slightest of smiles. "Oh, will you be joining us? You're welcome to sit too."

Her heart ached at the distant way he spoke to her, but she subdued the feeling.

"I mustn't," Rimi said calmly. "I am not a member of the rear palace at the moment and I am not a lady of rank. I wouldn't dream of sitting at the same table as His Majesty. As Virtuous Consort Ho and Worthy Consort On are staying here, I came as an attendant in case a woman was needed. It seems you and His Majesty have business to attend to, so I will wait outside with Master Hakurei."

Rimi bowed and then signaled Hakurei with a glance. Hakurei gave a small nod and bowed as well. As they turned to leave, Shohi's gaze shifted slightly toward Rimi. She could feel his expectation in the silent look. Rimi straightened herself up.

Jotetsu and Kunki took their places by the wall and Shohi took a seat. Shusei sat across the table from him.

"Now then, what can I do for you on such short notice, Your Majesty?" Shusei said innocently. His voice carried outside to Rimi, and she placed her hand on her heart.

Master Shusei sounds so cold. I wonder how His Majesty feels facing him right now?

As they stepped out to the cloister surrounding the main hall, Hakurei placed a comforting hand on Rimi's back.

"Are you all right, Rimi? You don't look well," he said.

"I'm all right. More importantly, we need to find Master Cho'un," she said.

"I assume he'll be staying in a guest house, so let's check there," Hakurei said. His voice was confident and reassuring. "My mother came from the Ho House. She brought me here a few times. I can lead the way."



Rimi looked at me with such fright.

Loneliness crept its way into Shusei's heart briefly, but he shook it off and

turned his focus to Shohi. The emperor faced him with an unsurprisingly confrontational expression.

But of course. He's facing his mortal enemy. I'm sure it was his own decision to come here like this. The question is: what does he know about the situation and what lies behind it? What brought you here, Your Majesty?

Shusei was vaguely concerned about his own ability to handle this calmly with so many thoughts swirling in his mind. However, Shusei could not let himself lose his composure here. He had prepared himself when he had set things in motion and could not afford to waver now.

"Now then, what can I do for you on such short notice, Your Majesty?"

"I've come to collect Consorts Ho and On," Shohi said, staring straight at Shusei.

Shusei raised his eyebrows.

How did he find out? From the sound of it, he knows that we've detained his consorts and the reason why. Which means I should assume he knows essentially everything.

Shusei gave a small smile as he came to understand the situation.

He's come to order me to free them. Of course, he must also know I don't intend to simply hand them over.

"Smiling? Do you find something funny, Shusei?" Shohi said.

"No, not at all," Shusei said, straightening himself up.

Now the real question, Your Majesty. How do you plan on making me comply?

Chapter 6: An Imperial Way of Negotiating

I

Rimi had to practically run to keep up with Hakurei as he quickly strode through the estate's walkways.

Before he rushed off, Hakurei had explained that there were about five guest houses distantly surrounding the main hall. Just as he had described, each one was quite far from the central building, so moving from one building to the next took great effort. Each appeared vacant, except for the one that had a guard posted outside. That was likely where Ho and On were being held, but Shohi would have to handle that. It pained Rimi to leave them behind, but she had to move on with Hakurei.

The next guest house was hidden deep in a bamboo thicket. The door was open, and a man could be seen inside with his back to the window. It had to be Kan Cho'un.

"He's here. That's Kan Cho'un," Hakurei said, straightening himself up. There was a nervousness in his voice. He had likely never met the administrator, but he seemed to know of the Hero of the Countryside. "Shall we?"

"Master Kan Cho'un?" Rimi called and bowed deeply. Hakurei, who was close behind her, did as well.

The Hero of the Countryside, who was at a desk with paper in hand, turned around in shock at the sound of Rimi's voice.

"Flowers-for-Brains? Why are you here? Are you telling me you really are a member of the Ho House?" he asked.

"No, I am not. My name is Setsu Rimi. And this is the director of Konkoku's rear palace, Sai Hakurei."

"Traveling with the director of the rear palace? So you're not just anybody, are you? I can't imagine a regular palace woman traveling with the director, so I

assume you're of higher status than him. A consort, then?" Cho'un intuited.

"I am not a consort. Right now, I have no official status. I'm currently in the middle of my enthronement ceremony," Rimi said.

Cho'un's eyes widened.

"You're the candidate for empress?" he asked. As an administrator, he would be aware that the emperor had chosen a bride and the enthronement ceremony had begun.

"That's right. And I'm here because I want you to hear me out. I know you wouldn't listen to me in Annei, but I'm here to see you again," Rimi said, refusing to look away.

"I told you I'd hear you out if we met again," Cho'un said after a moment of silence. "A deal's a deal. Come on in. The director's welcome too."

He turned and ushered Rimi to a table. Hakurei refused, choosing to stand by the wall, but Rimi sat across from the administrator.

"Well, let's hear what you have to say," Cho'un said calmly, folding his hands on the table.

Cho'un had witnessed the exchange between Shohi and Shusei in the Hall of New Harmony. He likely already understood that the two weren't exactly allies. If the emperor's bride-to-be had come to the Ho House in spite of that, he must have understood that there was a pressing reason for it.

I'm no strategist. All I can do is come right out and ask.

Rimi straightened herself up.

"Master Cho'un, please come with me to the imperial palace. His Majesty ordered an investigation into the dire situation in the five prefectures and has found the cause. He wants to speak with you personally," she said.

"What do you mean he 'has found the cause'? He found something, just like that, when none of the administrators have been able to figure anything out?" Cho'un asked doubtfully.

"His Majesty has someone in his service who was able to cut right to the heart of the matter. It turns out that Ma Ijun created a secret organization called the

Mutual Aid Group. Its purpose is to disrupt the economy,” Rimi explained.

Cho’un’s eyebrow twitched. She wondered if he’d realized something.

“Master Cho’un, neither of us wants a war, right?” Rimi asked.

“War? Don’t be ridiculous,” he said.

“Armies from all five prefectures are marching to rescue you. They’re headed for Gokogen, which is close to Annei. We think they’re going to arrive tonight,” she said.

“What? Why? I’m a guest of the Ho House. I can come and go freely. I’ve sent letters to my substitute in An and the other four—”

He suddenly fell silent and stared down at his hands.



“It seems you’ve already guessed. Those letters likely never arrived,” Hakurei said, hammering the point home. “Rather, your substitute and the other four administrators have been misled into believing you have been imprisoned and face execution. They believe these rumors because they come from a rather trustworthy source. We can think of only one person who could be responsible.”

“Ho Shusei?” Cho’un asked.

“Shusei had a motive for protecting you. He wanted to use you,” Hakurei said sharply. “I don’t think that’s what you want. That’s exactly why we want you to come with us.”

“To the palace? Where the emperor or the chancellor or someone else is eagerly waiting to throw me into a cell?” Cho’un said.

“His Majesty said he wants to talk to you. He didn’t say a single word about arresting you,” Hakurei said.

“And does the chancellor feel the same way?”

Rimi and Hakurei exchanged glances.



That glance told Cho’un everything he needed to know. The two were being stupidly honest.

He’d met Rimi twice before, once in Gisan and once in Annei. She had seemed like an utter stranger to lying and scheming. The director she was traveling with appeared to have a cunning way about him, but he didn’t seem to be working any sort of plot as far as Cho’un could tell.

It seemed the emperor really did want to speak with him.

The problem was the chancellor. It was a young Shu Kojin who had imprisoned Cho’un’s adoptive father Kan Rakusei. Cho’un would never forget the way the chancellor had shoved and dragged the rope-bound Rakusei, looking down at the man with cold eyes.

Kojin had his son alongside him, a boy of about ten. His son had looked away from Rakusei in pain and then up at his father with a mixture of anger and fear.

Cho'un had been in the crowd with Rakusei's other adopted children. There had been sixteen of them. The youngest was three and the oldest, Cho'un, was fifteen. They had huddled together, biting their lips and smothering their voices. Rakusei himself had forbidden them from speaking out. If anyone knew they were his adopted children, they might have ended up sharing his fate.

Cho'un remembered holding the three-year-old in his arms and glaring at Rakusei. The child had been so warm that his tiny, fragile body made Cho'un sweat.

Dust had swirled beneath the autumn sun as a suffocating crowd began to gather. Nobody had said a thing, but Cho'un knew they had all been silently thanking Rakusei and begging for his forgiveness. Everyone there knew that Rakusei had sacrificed himself for them.

Cho'un, meanwhile, silently cursed Rakusei's name.

Idiot. The old man was an absolute idiot. Again and again, Cho'un cursed him.

The staggering Rakusei's gaze had eventually fallen on Cho'un. He'd smiled then, and mouthed something.

It's up to you.

The tears that had welled in Cho'un's eyes at that moment completely blocked Rakusei from his sight, but he'd managed to keep himself from crying. More than ever, he had been struck by the absolute foolishness of the old man. Because Cho'un knew Rakusei didn't care that he was being arrested. If anything, he was relieved, overjoyed even, at being able to do his duty.

It's up to you.

As Cho'un had watched Rakusei stagger away, he had wondered what he meant. *What's up to me?*

Fool. Idiot. Moron. He cursed Rakusei again and again, but somewhere in the corner of his mind, the question remained.

It was why Cho'un had taken the appointment examination.

He had seen Shu Kojin again for the first time in many years at his inauguration as an administrator. Kojin, of course, had no idea who Cho'un was.

He had the same cold eyes as the day he'd dragged Rakusei away, but Cho'un wouldn't let that stop him from becoming an administrator.

And now it had come to this.

I have to see him again.

Rakusei's words continued to echo in his mind. *It's up to you.*



Rimi wasn't sure how to answer Cho'un's question. She knew that Shohi had no intention of arresting the administrator. His goal was to get the prefectural armies to retreat peacefully. Kojin shared that objective.

The question was what came after. Whatever the reason, Cho'un's proclamation to the emperor had looked like defiance, and he'd done it in full view of the other officials. When everything was resolved, there was a chance Cho'un would be charged with a crime.

"Well..." Rimi said.

Cho'un looked at the hesitating Rimi and the silent Hakurei. Then, he closed his eyes and spoke.

"You're honest sorts. All right. It doesn't matter to me in the end if I'm arrested or charged with a crime. So I'm fine with going to the palace. But there's something I need you to swear to me..."



The moment Shohi had announced he had come to bring Ho and On back, Shusei had smiled. The smile told the emperor everything. Shusei knew what Shohi's goal was and what he had figured out.

"I'll say it once more. I am here to collect Consorts Ho and On. Bring them here," Shohi said.

"When noble ladies travel, certain preparations must be made. I will send word to have them sent home," Shusei said.

"There's no need. Bring them to me now."

"Well then, I will send a handmaid to inform the consorts. Just wait here, and she can bring you their answer."

“And how can I be sure this handmaid returns with their actual answer? I don’t need them to respond. I order you to bring them here at once.”

“A handmaid wouldn’t be able to bear issuing such an outrageous order to ladies of rank.”

The longer the exchange went on, the more frustrated Shohi grew.

“Then what am I to do?” Shohi asked.

“If only I knew. Perhaps you could search the guest houses yourself and tell them personally?”

Shohi couldn’t help but jump from his seat at the provocation. “I’ll do just that!” he wanted to shout. But the image of the consorts and Jotetsu kneeling came to mind. He remembered the feeling of Rimi stroking his head. The memories helped calm him.

I have something I need to protect. I have to stay calm.

As Shohi closed his eyes and took a deep breath, Shusei looked at him in surprise.

Rimi must have volunteered to go because she knew she had a chance. Shohi was certain that she could explain things to Cho’un and bring him back to the palace.

It’s pointless to try to outmaneuver Shusei without touching on the truth. I’m getting caught up in his game, one I know he’s better at. He can evade me because he knows me so well, but I know him too.

Shohi opened his eyes.

Shusei’s greatest weakness is dealing with honesty and emotion, “theory” be damned. If I go that route, he won’t be able to distance himself.

A breeze swept through the bamboo thicket and into the hall. When the rustling of bamboo leaves finally stopped, Shohi readied himself.

“Do you hate me, Shusei?” he asked.

“Hate the emperor? Your Majesty? Perish the thought,” Shusei said with a smile.

"I still can't bring myself to hate you," Shohi said sharply.

Shusei's smile froze. The stiff smile quickly gave way to a composed one. But the look in his eyes made him seem lost.

"How troublesome," he said.

"I asked if you hated me. Answer me, yes or no?"

"Is that really so important? Here? Now?"

"It is. It's important to me," Shohi said.

Shusei took a small breath.

"Of course not," he said.

The sense of relief the emperor felt at the words ran to his core. He felt that he could stay strong, no matter what Shusei thought or did, as long as he knew Shusei didn't hate him.

Even after everything that happened, Shohi couldn't hate Shusei.

But he's still my foe.

He did not hate Shusei, but he'd be damned if he was going to lose to him.

"I know that the Ho House has conspired with Ma Ijun to disrupt the provincial economies. I also know that the prefectural armies have been told that Kan Cho'un has been arrested and faces execution. My guess is that you want to ally the Ho House with the provincial forces, giving you an army that could oppose me. But I won't charge you with any of it," Shohi said.

Jotetsu and Kunki exchanged glances from the side. They seemed to question whether such a promise was wise. But Shohi turned to them and gave a confident and reassuring nod.

"If you've surmised all that, then why wouldn't you charge me?" Shusei asked.

"Because frankly, I can't. The only evidence we have ties Ma Ijun to the Mutual Aid Group disrupting the economy. We have nothing that can firmly prove that the Ho House is involved," Shohi confessed.

The Ho House had been clever in that regard. No evidence existed that linked

the Ho House to Ma Ijun. Even the letters that had been sent to the administrators could be written off as mistakes.

“Ma Ijun will be thoroughly punished and the provincial economies will be repaired. I have no intention of charging the administrators with crimes either. Kojin, Rihan, and Keiyu also know that the Ho House had a hand in this, but they have all agreed not to press the issue. In exchange, you will return Consorts Ho and On as well as Kan Cho’un,” Shohi ordered.

“You yourself admitted that there is no proof, and therefore I can’t be prosecuted?” Shusei said.

“That’s right. There is no proof. Clearly, I can’t charge you, so I won’t. However, I am the emperor. Evidence or not, an order from me could destroy the Ho House. But if I did that, I’d be viewed as a tyrant. The Ho House would not go quietly, and the conflict might end up harming Annei. I don’t want that to happen,” Shohi explained. “But if the Ho House dies, this eternal thorn in my side dies with it. Even if the parties backing your house wanted to revolt against a tyrannical emperor, they would need time to organize and find a new banner to rally around. In the meantime, I would be able to take action.”

Shohi would ordinarily never be able to pardon the Ho House knowing their involvement. They had caused no end of distress for Shohi and had chosen the despicable act of abusing the commoners as part of their ploy. Still, if he punished them too harshly without clear evidence, it could call his reign into question down the road.

Neither option satisfied Shohi, but the more magnanimous option had a better chance of avoiding the present danger. If it didn’t work, then he would be forced into action. And if conflict became unavoidable, then the Ho House would be the focus of that conflict. It would undoubtedly cause chaos, but it would be the only option.

Shohi would not stop hounding Shusei.

“You’re the greatest scholar in Konkoku. You already know what the right choice is, don’t you, Shusei?”



“You want us to swear something? What?” Rimi asked and leaned forward.

“You said His Majesty wants to speak with me. I need to make sure that happens. Whatever the chancellor or ministers might do to try and get in the way, I need to see the emperor. That’s it,” Cho’un explained.

“I can promise that,” Rimi said.

“I’m not sure if it’s possible, but something in writing would be best,” he said.

Rimi looked around. She was sure that if she could give Cho’un proof of the agreement, she could get him to come with them.

Even if I gave him a written promise, it wouldn’t carry any weight with Chancellor Shu or the ministers. So...

On top of the desk was a blade used for cutting paper. It was a slim blade with a floral pattern, but it was surprisingly sharp. Rimi jumped up, grabbed the knife, and offered it to Cho’un.

“Take this. If something goes wrong and it looks like you won’t be able to talk to him, then take me as a hostage and demand to see the emperor. I’ll stay right by your side.”

Hakurei grabbed Rimi’s arm in shock as if hoping to stop her.

“Rimi, wait. His Majesty entrusted me with your care. I can’t let you make such a dangerous promise,” he said.

“It’s fine. His Majesty will definitely speak with Cho’un, so there’s nothing to worry about,” she said.

Cho’un seemed to sense something in their exchange because he suddenly stood up, took the knife from Rimi, and slipped it into his sleeve.

“It’s a deal. Let’s go.”

II

Shusei suddenly smiled broadly.

“Magnanimity and violence. It seems you’re willing to use your power as an emperor in both extremes. You have a very honest, straightforward, and

imperial way of negotiating. I appreciate you coming here to face me yourself rather than leaving it to someone else or running away,” Shusei said.

“Are you mocking me?” Shohi asked.

“I’m complimenting you. Giving me such a straightforward proposal lets me decide without needing to waste time,” Shusei said.

Neither side could look away, and Shohi began to feel as if he was being swallowed up by Shusei’s dark eyes. The emperor had no idea what sort of calculations were going on behind those eyes, but he felt that if he broke eye contact, he’d lose. Swallowing hard, he waited for Shusei’s answer.

“If only you hadn’t come yourself, this might not have ended in defeat,” Shusei said.

He suddenly rose from his chair and went to the wall where a vermilion rope hung. Shohi could hear a distant chiming when Shusei pulled on it. His words and the sound put Shohi, Jotetsu, and Kunki on guard.

What was that sound? Did he say defeat?! I’ve lost?! What’s happening?!

The emperor looked around wildly as the tension swelled, but nothing happened.

“Consorts Ho and On will be here shortly. As for Cho’un, you’ll need to speak with him yourself. If he agrees to go, then feel free to take him,” Shusei said calmly and offered a deep bow.

Shohi blinked repeatedly.

“What did you say?”

“I’ve signaled our handmaidens to bring the consorts. They won’t be long. Go ahead and take Cho’un with you. Explain things to him. You’ve won this battle.”

With Shusei’s blunt declaration, Shohi finally understood.

He meant his defeat?

The moment Shohi realized what Shusei had meant, all the strength drained from his body. He felt as if he’d just realized how tired he’d become.

“I’ll excuse myself. Just know this. Even if Cho’un goes with you, it doesn’t

mean he'll go along blindly with your plan," Shusei said with a smile.

Shusei slipped past Shohi and left the main hall. When Shohi could no longer sense him nearby, his legs suddenly began to wobble. Jotetsu and Kunki rushed to his side to support him.

Shusei lost?

Shohi was elated. It wasn't so much that Shusei had been defeated, but that Shohi himself had come out victorious. He'd come here to protect something and had succeeded. It made him happy.

Now we just have to stop the prefectural armies.

"Your Majesty!" Rimi called out, rushing through the door. Her lively voice resounded through the hall, but when she realized Shusei was gone, she grew cautious. "Where's Master Shusei?"

Jotetsu gave her a reassuring smile.

"Relax. Shusei left. He's got the consorts on their way right now and even told us to go work things out with Cho'un," he said.

"You did it, Your Majesty!" Rimi cried.

Shohi thought she was adorable as her wide eyes grew even wider. He smiled.

"That's right. How about you?" Shohi asked.

Rimi smiled broadly.

"Master Cho'un is already in the carriage," she said.

Shohi just needed to hold on a little longer. When they returned to the palace, he would meet with Cho'un. Once he ordered the prefectural armies to fall back, the danger would pass.

Shohi fought off the fatigue, steeled himself, and stood up straight.

"We're headed back."



Consorts Ho and On soon arrived with tired expressions. There was no time to celebrate as everyone boarded the carriage back to the palace. Shohi shared a carriage with Ho and On, but since Rimi was still stuck without a status, she

joined Hakurei and Cho'un in another carriage.

It wasn't until they were back in the palace that Rimi was finally able to relax.

Truthfully, Shohi should've gone to meet with Kojin and the others immediately. However, the emperor had decided he would meet with Cho'un before speaking to them, so Hakurei and Rimi led the Hero of the Countryside to the Hall of Enlightenment.

When word that preparations for the meeting had been arranged reached him, Hakurei rushed away. As Rimi had promised to be Cho'un's hostage, she stayed with him in the Hall of Enlightenment.

Through the open door, deutzias could be seen surrounding the hall. The countless white buds on their branches were close to flowering.

"What is it you want to protect?" Cho'un asked.

He'd been silent ever since arriving at the palace, but he finally turned his pale face to Rimi and spoke. He looked dreadfully tense, likely because he was about to meet with the emperor. But he also had the keen sharpness of someone about to do battle.

"His Majesty. I have been able to earn a place in the world by supporting His Majesty with my food. I decided to become empress so I could stay by his side and keep supporting him," Rimi explained.

"Then why were you with Shusei in Gisan? You two seemed awfully close," he asked.

Rimi wasn't sure how to answer the sudden and painful question, but she decided that a poor attempt at lying would just harm Cho'un's faith in her.

"We both worked to serve His Majesty. He as a cuisinologist, and I as his assistant. I was in love with him. He said he felt the same. But things have changed, and we no longer share those feelings," Rimi said.

"You're honest, but I caught a lie there. You still have feelings for each other," Cho'un said.

"No, you're wrong. I... I don't know how to let go. But Master Shusei is different. He told me very clearly that his feelings for me are dead."

“Maybe he lied?”

Rimi was shocked. She couldn't even imagine Shusei telling a lie. But when they had parted in the Cave of the Water Spirit, he had lied and left her. Why *had* he lied?

He said the man known as Shu Shusei would disappear. And since I was so upset, he lied to make me let go.

Why did he even need to announce it in the first place? If he was going to lie, why not just lie completely?

But it was *because* he told the truth that he had to lie.

Why had Shusei lied to her? Ever since they'd met beneath the rosewood, Rimi had felt like she was overlooking something important. But now, she felt like she was finally beginning to understand.

It seemed that Cho'un wasn't expecting an answer as he suddenly turned his attention to the entrance of the hall.

“It looks like His Majesty has arrived,” he mumbled.

Shohi entered the Hall of Enlightenment with Jotetsu and Hakurei following him. Cho'un gave a deep bow.

“You don't need to bow,” Shohi said with a wave as he passed Cho'un and went around the latticed partition at the far end of the hall, sitting down at a table. “I have something to say, and I have a request as well. Come here, Kan Cho'un.”

Being given a place at the same table as the emperor was unusually warm treatment for an administrator, but Cho'un didn't even smile. He simply turned to Rimi, pulled the small silver knife from his sleeve, and handed it to her.

“It looks like I'll get my wish, so you can have this back. It may be small, but I can hardly sit down with an emperor while I'm holding a blade,” Cho'un said.

He seemed like someone who was prepared to march off to their death. His seriousness made Rimi uncomfortable.

“Master Cho'un, His Majesty only wants to talk to you. There's no way he's planning on punishing you,” she said.

“I don’t know how this is going to play out,” Cho’un said.

“What are you planning to do when you see him?” Rimi said.

“My duty. I just have to make sure I carry it out,” he said plainly.

With that, he rounded the partition and sat at the table across from Shohi. Jotetsu stood close by to protect Shohi while Hakurei hurriedly prepared some tea.

Ordinarily, there would be no reason for Rimi to be there, but she was the one who had persuaded Cho’un. If something were to happen, she would carry part of the blame, and she couldn’t bear to leave.

The bright evening sun shone through the open windows and door, splashing vermilion light across the stone floor. The atmosphere in the Hall of Enlightenment was like brittle glass. Cho’un’s nervousness had Jotetsu on edge.

“We meet once again, Kan Cho’un,” Shohi said with a strained voice, looking directly at the administrator’s pallid face. “Did Rimi explain how things stand at the moment?”

“She said the chaos plaguing the provincial economies is due to Ma Ijun’s scheming. She also said the prefectural armies have been misled into believing I’ve been arrested. They are marching to rescue me and should arrive at Gokogen at some point tonight,” Cho’un responded. His face was as calm and pale as ever.

What’s with this friction? It’s like two rocks grinding against each other.

They had both wanted to see the other. Now they were sitting at the same table, yet they couldn’t be more tense.

“I’m glad to hear that she told you everything. Just as I have no intention of punishing you, I don’t seek to punish the prefectural armies. Furthermore, once our investigation is complete, Ma Ijun will be arrested and punished. But if we want to go about doing that, we need the prefectural armies to fall back. When they arrive at Gokogen, you are to appear before them, inform them of the state of affairs and my decision, and have them disband,” Shohi ordered.

Cho’un remained silent for a long time. With the armies arriving that night,

they had little time to make a decision, making Shohi quickly grow exasperated by the extended silence.

“Are you listening, Kan Cho’un?! Order them to disband!” Shohi snapped.

“I don’t know,” Cho’un finally said.

He’s refusing?!

In her shock, the small blade slipped from Rimi’s hand and rang out as it struck the stone floor.

Shohi, who clearly hadn’t expected Cho’un to refuse, stared at him, dumbfounded. Jotetsu’s eyes widened too, and the tea-making utensils clinked as Hakurei inadvertently struck them against a cup in surprise.

“What did you say?” Shohi asked.

“I said I don’t know,” the Hero of the Countryside responded.

“Once we investigate the cause of the financial chaos, Ijun will be tried and punished. I won’t charge the prefectural armies with a crime either. Don’t you understand that?”

“I do.”

“Then why won’t you order the armies to fall back?!”

Shohi slammed his fist on the table, unable to contain his anger and frustration. A teacup was upended, sending a stream of tea across the table to leave a dark stain on the floor. Despite that, Cho’un’s expression never broke as he refused to look away from Shohi.

“The fact that you have to ask is the exact reason why I can’t,” he said.

“If I don’t understand, then explain it to me!” Shohi shouted.

“It’s not something I can explain.”

Frustration began to well inside Rimi as she listened to the exchange. There had been friction between them to begin with, but it was only getting worse. Someone was liable to snap. Crisis was imminent, and Rimi felt that if talks broke down now, they would be past the point of no return.

The friction is between their thoughts. Their ideas. Their positions.

They both wanted to meet, but their ways of thinking and positions were too different. It was like they were passing balls between them, but neither could catch the other person's ball.

I have to get rid of this friction, but how?!

"I don't have time for your riddles!" Shohi said.

"Shame," Cho'un said.

Things were about to break down. Rimi could feel it. Without even realizing it, she prayed for help.

Lady Saigu, what should I do?!

The response was sharp, almost like a shock.

You already know what to do! You are an Umashi-no-Miya!

An Umashi-no-Miya. The word was like a bolt of insight.

That's right! I do know what to do! I know how to relieve this friction!

Rimi was running off and around the partition before she even realized it.

"I almost forgot! Your Majesty, Master Cho'un, it's nearly time for supper!" she cried.

Shohi and Cho'un both raised an eyebrow at Rimi's sudden outcry. Jotetsu clearly wanted to question her too. Hakurei, who was in the middle of cleaning up the spilled teacup, froze and looked over at her.

"Go, Rimi. It is not the time," Shohi said, shaking his head. His expression was especially harsh.

"No, Your Majesty. It has to be now," she said.

"Are you insane?" Shohi said.

"It has to be now," Rimi insisted forcefully.

Something in her voice must have gotten through to Shohi because his expression shifted slightly.

"Right now?" he inquired.

"Right now," she said.

Shohi could surely tell that the talks would fall apart at this rate. If they were going to fall apart anyway, Rimi hoped he would bet on her plan, which at least had a small chance of success.

A moment passed as they simply stared at each other. Finally, Shohi gave a small nod.

“Fine, I’ll permit it. Go and ready it,” he ordered.

III

Cho’un looked perplexed. It was an entirely natural response. The situation was tense, and it felt more like they were exchanging punches rather than words. He must have wondered what Rimi was thinking when she barged in and announced that it was suppertime.

But that’s perfect.

Rimi offered a deep bow and courteously excused herself. Her eyes met Jotetsu’s through the partition as she was leaving, and he gave her a smile and a small wave. Maybe he knew what she was planning and was giving her some encouragement. Hakurei, who had been silently cleaning up the tea, seemed to understand as well.

“You don’t have much time,” he whispered from behind Rimi as she went to leave.

Rimi nodded back to the two of them and left. The moment she was outside the Hall of Enlightenment, she lifted her skirt and sprinted to the kitchen. The Chief of Dining and the staff would likely be there preparing supper. If she could get them to help, she could finish quickly.

But what should I serve?!

Rimi’s mind raced as she ran. Shohi’s nerves must have been shot after the exchange with Shusei. And Cho’un must have been in enormous shock after learning of Ma Ijun and the Ho House’s scheming. What was more, he also seemed to have readied himself for something he wouldn’t explain, which had him on edge.

Both of them were up against a wall, rubbing against each other like stones.

So I need to take what's hard and soften it.

Shohi, Kojin, and the ministers often dined together during their council meetings, as they needed to discuss matters while they ate. Rimi had heard that merchants would negotiate over dinner as well. The reason was simple: delicious food made it easier to stay relaxed while talking. Who could get upset in the middle of a delicious meal? There was something instinctual about food. It could soften any creature's heart.

That was why Rimi had decided she would serve them supper. Shohi must have allowed it because he realized what she was planning.

Now the only question is what to serve. People lose their appetite when things are too tense. If they don't eat, they'll just end up awkwardly sitting there as the food gets cold.

Right now, both of them were hard as stones. They wouldn't be able to dig in just because food appeared.

The evening sun was sinking. Rimi raced through the growing shadows of the palace.

I need to get them to eat, even if it's just a little bit. Just a little bit...

That was it.

When His Majesty lost his appetite, all he could eat was one bite. Just one bite!

As Rimi approached the kitchen on the north side of the Hall of the Rising Dragon, the smell of steamed food and spicy stir-fry filled the air. Steam rolled out of the open door and latticed windows of the kitchen. The place brimmed with life as the sounds of chopping knives and shouted instructions echoed.

Rimi called to the Chief of Dining as she rushed through the door. Inside, Yo Koshin was tossing food in a pan. He made a shocked noise when he saw her and dropped the iron ladle he was holding.

"I know you! Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, ain'tcha?" he said.

"It's been too long, Chief of Dining. I need your help," Rimi said.

As Rimi rushed to Koshin's side and grabbed his sleeve, he took a fearful step back.

"Back up, back up! The hell are you doing here? I heard you already had your Executive Audience. You're gonna be empress!" Koshin said.

"So?" Rimi said.

"So?! Don't play dumb! The hell is a future empress doing in a kitchen?!" Koshin said.

"I had to come! His Majesty allowed it too!" Rimi insisted.

Her forceful tone managed to overwhelm Koshin's surprise and confusion. As Hakurei had said, they didn't have time.

"I have to prepare supper for His Majesty. I need your help," Rimi said.

"But we're already preparing supper for His Majesty?"

"That's fine. I'll just work alongside you."

Koshin, having begun to regain his composure, tilted his head.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It doesn't matter what we actually serve as long as it tastes good. However, I have a certain way I'm going to prepare it. What I need is food, and a lot of it. So I must have all of your help. His Majesty is meeting with an important guest right now, and he's ordered me to prepare food for them," Rimi hurriedly explained.

All the cooks and servant boys in the kitchen stared at the two with mouths agape.

"Lemme get this straight. His Majesty's ordered us to serve up some food for him and some important guest? And you've got some kind of plan?" Koshin said.

"That's right. I need all of you to cook with me," Rimi confirmed.

Rimi's eyes were intense as she stared up at Koshin. He slowly looked around the kitchen.

"Well, an order's an order. Hear her out, boys!" Koshin shouted.

“Thank you, Chief!” Rimi said.

“Don’t thank me, I’m just following His Majesty’s orders. Now, tell us what to do.”

“All right!”

Everyone in the kitchen froze in place and looked at Rimi. It made her nervous. She’d never been the focus of so much attention in the kitchen before. She couldn’t help but feel like the kitchen was a solitary place. Still, when she imagined putting herself amidst the bustling atmosphere that had filled the hall moments before, she grew excited. She enjoyed cooking alone, but it would be fun to work alongside so many people.

Suddenly, Rimi was filled with an out-of-place euphoria. Shusei had betrayed Shohi, the prefectural armies were nearly at Gokogen, and it was unclear if Shohi would be able to get Cho’un to stop them. It was an impossibly tense situation. But in that moment, Rimi didn’t feel alone and panicked. She didn’t feel lost or unsure about what to do. She had a duty and something to protect. She had set her sights on a goal and had people to help her with it.

Rimi felt strength well within her.

“I’m sorry for coming here so suddenly. My name is Setsu Rimi. While I can’t explain all the details, His Majesty is meeting with a very important guest. He’s ordered me to prepare a meal for them. Will you help me?”

The cooks all exchanged glances.

“If His Majesty’s ordered it, of course we’ll help,” a voice called out from the crowd. “But what do you want us to do? Do we have to do anything special?”

“No. I want you to make whatever you were planning to make for supper. But I want you to make as many different kinds of food as you can in the time we have. It doesn’t matter what it is, it just has to be tasty. There doesn’t need to be a lot of it either. One portion per dish would be enough,” Rimi explained.

“If that’s all you need, I can make six dishes in an hour!” someone called out.

“I can do eight!” another voice called, unwilling to be shown up.

Rimi smiled deeply at all of them.

“Please, make as much as you can. Also, could someone show me where the dishes are? I need to gather the necessary ones,” she said.

The cooks gave a collective shout of acknowledgment and set about to work. Rimi tied up her sleeves as well and followed a servant boy to the room where the dishes were stored.



Once Rimi had gone and Hakurei had cleaned up the mess, Shohi and Cho'un were left with nothing to do but sit in silence. The emperor stared at the Hero of the Countryside, unable to guess what was hiding behind the administrator's blank expression.

I said I would repair the local economies and wouldn't charge any of the administrators, including him, with a crime. Why would he refuse my order to have the armies withdraw? Surely he must realize that refusing could result in him being cut down here and now.

The color was beginning to fade from the slanting rays of light that slipped through the door and windows.

An attendant quietly entered the hall and whispered something to Jotetsu. He nodded, rounded the partition, and knelt beside Shohi.

“Reports are coming in from the imperial guard that the prefectural armies are arriving in Gokogen. Chancellor Shu is requesting permission to move the imperial army to Gokogen as well. He also said that if you cannot resolve things with Cho'un quickly, he will take matters into his own hands,” Jotetsu whispered.

Shohi bit his lip.

Is deploying the army our only choice?

He had hoped to avoid a standoff between armies if at all possible. The slightest spark could turn a standoff into a full-blown battle. Even after everything was resolved, those who faced imminent battle wouldn't let go of those feelings easily.

Still, if Cho'un wouldn't persuade the prefectural armies to fall back, then they would have no choice but to ready the imperial forces.

“He has my permission to deploy the men. But I will say it again, this does not mean we march to battle. We just want to hold them in check,” Shohi said. “As for Cho’un...”

Kojin was quick to act and wasn’t choosy about his methods. If he arrived, he would have Cho’un arrested on the spot. He would undoubtedly also threaten everyone the administrator knew and loved if the prefectural forces were not called off. It would be the quickest and most surefire of methods.

But from the look in his eyes...

Shohi could sense a strong conviction in Cho’un. Even if everyone he knew was threatened, the man would likely close his eyes and stand firm.

“Tell him to wait a bit longer regarding Cho’un,” the emperor ordered.

Jotetsu nodded and left the Hall of Enlightenment.

As the sunlight faded, an attendant began to light the lanterns adorning the hall. Though the area where Shohi sat was well-lit, the building was so expansive that darkness still settled around them.

Where is Rimi?

Cho’un had likely thought that Rimi’s announcement that she would prepare supper and Shohi’s assent was secretly some sort of signal. He was clearly on guard, wondering what was about to happen. He surely wouldn’t have guessed that they were actually readying supper.

It was a reasonable assumption. What fool would say “Let’s eat!” in a situation like this?

But she’s exactly that sort of fool.

Shohi was placing all his slim hopes on Rimi.

Does that make me just as much of a fool?

Shohi’s lips curled in amusement. Cho’un noticed the smile, and the suspicion deepened in his eyes.



Rimi was shown to a wood-floored room connected to the kitchen. Shelves

were evenly spaced along the wall, reaching all the way to the ceiling. Every inch of the shelves was crammed with stacked dishes. The soup bowls ranged from those small enough for a single serving to those large enough to fill one's arms. There were plates so huge that they could hold a human being and others so small that they could be nestled in one's palm. There were all sorts of colors as well: whites, blues, blacks, yellows. Some were adorned with elaborate gold and silver depictions of dragons and phoenixes, while others had simple patterns in blue.

Once Rimi found what she was looking for, she returned to the kitchen with the servant. When the cooks saw the plate, they seemed to immediately understand what she was planning. When it came to their craft, they were clearly perceptive. Once they understood what they were doing, they knew the most efficient way to handle it. Rimi was encouraged as she saw them begin to work even faster.

Rimi looked over the dishes the chefs had prepared and the ones they were working on and decided what she would make.

I think I'll make something in Wakokuan style.

"Tell the Noble Consort that Setsu Rimi needs some kaorizuke," Rimi said to one of the boys, sending him off to the rear palace. Since Rimi regularly shared her kaorizuke with So, she figured the Noble Consort would have some on hand.

The kitchen had recently begun stocking kengyoken and umifu, the hardened fish and seaweed from Rimi's homeland, which she made soup stock from. Wakokuan soup stock could be made in no time at all, which was an enormous help.

Rimi poured the golden stock into a small pot and heated it. She then added four skinned taro roots and some sugar. Once the roots began to soften, she added a bit of salt and ganjiang. Finally, she threw in a handful of lightly blanched canola shoots and boiled the dish.

She then took some salted shiso leaves and soaked them in water to remove some of the salt. After that, she thinly sliced a daikon radish and let the slices soak in sweet vinegar, creating sweetly sour purple daikon.

Koshin and the others were steadily producing all sorts of dishes. Deep-fried pork with sweet vinegar. Sweet and salty stir-fried shrimp. Glass noodles with chopped jellyfish. Crispy duck skin in a salty-sweet sauce. Since everything was being produced in small quantities, it didn't take long to prep the ingredients, which was normally the biggest time commitment in cooking. So, the dishes were coming out in the blink of an eye.

Amazing!

Rimi watched the cooks try to one-up each other as she worked. It made her heart pound.

Chapter 7: Those Who Manipulate, Those Who Inspire

I

Now prepared, Rimi had one of the servant boys fetch Hakurei. She knew she would never be able to carry the meal to the Hall of Enlightenment on her own.

Thanks to the cooks' painstaking efforts, they had ended up preparing fifty different dishes. None of them uttered a single complaint about the time-consuming work. Far from it. They diligently produced one dish after another.

"That's one hell of a spread," Kishin said in amazement as he gazed at the completed feast.

The heat of the stoves and the scent of spices and smoke lingered in the air. All the cooks seemed pleased with themselves.

"You're gonna carry that thing?" one said.

"Wouldn't want to be you!" said another.

They seemed amused by the meal they'd created.

Just then, the servant boy returned, leading Hakurei into the kitchen. The eunuch's eyes widened as he caught sight of the numerous dishes that had been left on the counter.

"What in heaven's name..." Hakurei murmured.

The cooks, clearly enjoying his shock, all grinned.

"It's His Majesty and Master Cho'un's supper. I was hoping to carry it back, but I can't do it alone," Rimi said.

"I should think not. And I think it's even too great a task for just the two of us. I'll have to summon some of His Majesty's servants," Hakurei said. Growing more amazed, he added, "I have to say, I was wondering what you were

thinking when you barged in and announced supper. This was what you were planning? What do you hope this will do?"

"I don't know. I just knew I had to do something to change the mood," Rimi said.

"I can only hope they'll actually eat. Given the circumstances, I doubt they'll eat more than a bite..."

Just as he said it, Hakurei suddenly looked at the meal again.

"Exactly," Rimi said.

"Yes, I see!" Hakurei said.

The eunuch suddenly rushed off and quickly returned with several attendants.

"His Majesty and Master Cho'un are waiting for their meal. Please, get ready to present the food," Hakurei said to Rimi with a nod.

Rimi waited by the door as the attendants gathered up the meal. As they prepared to leave, she bowed to Koshin and everyone else in the kitchen.

"Thank you so much. I could never have done this without all of your help," she said.

"It's our job. Now go on, get out of here. You can't leave His Majesty waiting," Koshin said with a grin.

Rimi bowed once more and left the kitchen.

"Your supper has arrived," Hakurei announced as they entered the Hall of Enlightenment.

Cho'un, who had been keeping his eyes firmly forward, couldn't help but look through the latticed partition to the entrance. Shohi looked as well.

Hakurei stepped to the side of the doorway, allowing Rimi to enter. However, she was empty-handed. Shohi looked puzzled for a moment, likely wondering where the meal was. But his confusion switched to curiosity as four attendants appeared from behind her. They were in two pairs, each pair carrying an enormous black lacquered platter.

Cho'un was on guard, wondering what was about to happen. But as Rimi approached and the smell of food grew stronger, he looked surprised. Clearly, he had never imagined they would actually serve food.

Rimi rounded the partition and bowed.

"Supper is served," she said.

With that as the signal, the attendants approached and placed the platters in front of Shohi and Cho'un.

"What is this?" Shohi asked.

Now here's something you don't see every day, Cho'un's expression seemed to say as he looked at the dishes gathered on the platters.

The attendants excused themselves and Rimi rose from her bow. Taking a small breath, she closed her eyes.

It's time. Please, let this be of some help to His Majesty, Rimi prayed.

You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya.

Her sister's voice felt like spring rain as it came over Rimi.

Yes, Lady Saigu. I am.

Rimi slowly opened her eyes. Something soft and pure, yet powerful and unyielding, had formed inside of her. She had become an immortal offering a sacramental feast.



Rimi?

Something had changed in Rimi's demeanor, filling Shohi with courage. She remained herself, yet it felt like something unshakable and pure had descended to earth in order to gently embrace the anxious emperor.

"I call it baipinyiming, one hundred dishes on one plate. Please, enjoy!" Rimi announced eagerly while broadly smiling.

Leaves of bamboo grass had been arrayed on the platters, creating visions of verdant green against glossy black. Five rows of ten palm-sized plates were

arrayed across the leaves, and each one held a tiny, perfect meal.



Some of the dishes were already so vividly colored that Rimi had decided to give them a pure-white plate. A single slice of fried pork, drizzled in salty-sweet sauce, lay on one such plate. On another, single slices of green, red, and yellow vegetables were arranged. The meticulous care that had gone into their arrangement was obvious.

Rimi presented the taro that had been prepared with Wakokuan soup stock differently. The taro was pure-white in color, so Rimi had chosen a plate with an ivy design filled with an abundance of colors. Like the other dishes, there was only a single slice of taro root, garnished with a little yellow petal.

For the purple daikon pickled in sweet vinegar, three slices were arranged atop a celadon plate.

Twin slices of jade-colored kaorizuke had been placed on a green plate adorned with a golden rim.

Fifty dishes in total. It was a spectacular sight, and yet it still wasn't a very large quantity of food.

Though Rimi had called it "one hundred dishes," it was really only fifty. She'd likely chosen one hundred as a metaphor for "a great number," but she surely would've tried to make one hundred dishes if she'd had the time.

Shohi, however, was bewildered by the arrangement.

What is she planning? Is this really what she prepared?

At first glance, it was certainly intriguing. Every dish had been delicately plated, but none of them were especially unusual. Still, if Rimi wanted them to eat this, there had to be something to it. With that conviction in mind, Shohi picked up his chopsticks.

"Come, Cho'un. Eat," the emperor said.

Despite his own encouragement, Shohi didn't particularly feel like eating. Still, he knew the administrator wouldn't eat if he himself didn't, so he just had to force himself. The sauced, fried pork was nearby, so he picked it up and placed it in his mouth.

The slice of meat was cut to be perfectly bite-sized. Just one bite and the

plate was clean.

I'll have to force myself to eat just one more plate.

Next to the pork was some boiled winter melon. This bite was a very different experience from the last. The light taste of jitang spread through Shohi's mouth as he chewed. And just like before, a single bite had left the plate empty.

The first bite had been salty-sweet and the second had been lightly savory. Looking across the fifty different dishes for something in between, Shohi caught sight of the kaorizuke. He ate both slices in a single bite, but when he did, he found himself feeling rather unsatisfied.

What next? Just one more, Shohi thought as he surveyed the plates.

It wasn't until Shohi had cleared his third plate that Cho'un picked up his chopsticks. He looked reluctant as he gazed at the fifty dishes, but he chose a dish from the corner and picked the food up from it.



Cho'un had been in no mood to eat. Still, he would look like an idiot if he simply stared at his food while the emperor sat in front of him polishing off dishes. And even if he didn't have an appetite, he certainly had an empty stomach. It would also be boring just sitting around, waiting for the emperor to finish eating.

The administrator figured he might just eat a dish or two, so he grabbed one of the plates that sat to the left. It was a sharply spiced fried shrimp that left his mouth tingling. Next to the shrimp was some boiled sweet potato that looked like it would taste gentler on his tongue, so he took that next. He was relieved to find some familiar, rural cuisine among the offerings.

Suddenly, Cho'un furrowed his eyebrows.

Only two of the five plates that made up a line were empty. Something about the idea of leaving it like that irked him.

Maybe I should finish the row.

With that in mind, he began to eat the remaining three plates.



Shohi had cleared six plates, and Cho'un was working on his fifth. Once the administrator had finished with his fifth, he set down his chopsticks. However, after a moment of staring at the platter, he picked them back up and grabbed the leftmost plate from the second row.

Meanwhile, Shohi was grabbing plates from all over, picking whatever appealed to him.

As Jotetsu watched the pair through the partition, Hakurei came to stand next to him.

"Take a look. They're eating. I can't believe they can eat in a situation like this," Jotetsu whispered.

"No matter how delicious the food was, they might not have touched it. But rather than focusing on the cuisine itself, Rimi focused on the *way* the food was served," Hakurei said with a smile.



Rimi stood nearby to offer tea at appropriate times to cleanse their palates. When she saw Cho'un put down his chopsticks only to pick them back up, she smiled to herself.

He's the methodical sort. He doesn't believe in wasting food either, so when he notices there's food left, he can't get it out of his head.

If it had all been served on one plate, they might not have touched it, thinking they couldn't eat that much food. But when faced with such a little plate, they couldn't help themselves.

That was the first effect of baipinyiming.

Ordinarily, when a person has a poor appetite, they might not even be able to pick up their chopsticks. But when it's just a single bite, even if they don't have an appetite, they figure they can stomach it. They might even try eating simply because it would be boring to not eat.

They only need to eat one plate.

After a single bite, if there's still a mountain of food left, they might feel demoralized and give up. But if a single bite cleans their plate, they end up

feeling unsatisfied. When you're told "That's all!" rather than "Have some more," you end up instinctually wanting more. You might think you have no appetite, but your gut will end up asking for more.

That was the second effect of baipinyiming.

With a bird's-eye view of the entire meal, even if one of them were to think "I'll just have a plate or two," they wouldn't be able to avoid seeing everything that was left. The more methodical they were, or the more reluctant they were to waste food, the more it would eat at them. They wouldn't be able to avoid taking more.

That was the third effect of baipinyiming.

And then, as the little plates stacked up, one's belly would fill. That was the fourth and most important effect.

Cooking wasn't just about taste. Presentation was a vital part of serving a meal.

Shohi, who had been grabbing one plate after another, suddenly looked at Cho'un and frowned.

"Are you just going from one end to the other? What if you don't like something?" he asked.

"The only people who are picky about food are children and the elite," Cho'un responded.

Shohi looked offended by the immediate response.

"You're an elite too," the emperor said.

"And if I hadn't passed the appointment exam, I would be a peasant."

Rimi had turned away to prepare tea, but she couldn't keep herself from smiling as she listened to the exchange.

Their voices are softening.

It was still a thorny conversation, but their tone was entirely different. They no longer sounded so stiff and adversarial. No living creature could stay on edge while eating. Not when their basic instincts were being satiated.

Shohi picked and chose what he liked, while Cho'un cleared the plates from one end to the other. As they realized how their partner ate, they came to understand each other a bit better. Just that bit of understanding was enough to get them to steadily loosen up. After all, their full bellies were whispering to them, urging them to relax.

That was the power of food.

II

"A peasant? Then where did you get the education needed to pass the exam?" Shohi asked.

"Kan Rakusei, the old administrator of An, educated me. I'm his adopted son," Cho'un explained.

The emperor's immediate response was shock, but it quickly gave way to understanding.

"And that's why you're causing all this trouble? And why you won't order the armies to withdraw?" Shohi asked. "I heard the story of Kan Rakusei. The administrator of An who was tried for treason and died in jail. Do you hold a grudge because it was my predecessor's order that killed your adoptive father? But the administrator who succeeded Rakusei was able to carry out his duties without any problems. He found no reason why Rakusei would've rebelled. If that's the case, wasn't Rakusei's fate his own doing?"

The Hero of the Countryside shook his head.

"I certainly grieve Rakusei's death, but I don't hold a grudge over it. There's a reason he didn't know why Rakusei did it. There was a point to that year and a half he resisted," he said.

Shohi's face twisted in thought.

"Something changed in that year and a half? What could a single passing of the seasons—"

As the words left his mouth, Shohi's eyes grew as round as the rice-sprinkled fish dumpling he held in his chopsticks.

“The crops!” he exclaimed.

Even if the harvests suffered one year, as long as the following year’s harvest was back to normal, the people could get by. But what if the harvests were bad year after year? The tax debts would end up accruing, and by the time they were actually able to pay, their past debts would leave them just as poor as if they’d suffered from a bad harvest. So if they were granted tax relief for even a year, they would be able to focus on paying off their past debts.

“You mean to say Rakusei resisted the emperor for a year and a half so the people wouldn’t have to pay their taxes for that year? He went that route because An was not granted a tax reprieve and a rebellion would effectively make it impossible to collect taxes,” Shohi realized.

Rakusei’s rebellion had spared the citizens from a year of tax collection. He must surely have realized that he’d be imprisoned for treason, but he’d done it anyway.

“He knew he’d be punished, yet still...” Shohi said.

“Rakusei was a foolish old man, but he asked me to do something for him. Of course, he wouldn’t even tell me what it was I was supposed to do. Had to figure it out myself. That’s why I’m here,” Cho’un said.

An administrator lays down his life for the people and his last words were a request? What could he have wanted?

Something was overwhelming about Cho’un’s response. The young emperor felt as if he had been given a glimpse of what drove the man.

He’s carrying on Rakusei’s legacy. That’s why he’s so obsessed with his duty. It’s why he tries to live such an honest life, so he might earn the Hero of the Countryside title like Rakusei.

It must have been the reason he was so stubborn about not calling off the prefectural armies. It was the reason he had come to the palace himself.

But why *had* he come to the palace?

Is there something that’s here and nowhere else?

Shohi gasped.

Me!

There was only one emperor and he could only be found in the imperial palace.

Cho'un had said that he couldn't order the prefectural armies to stand down because Shohi understood nothing. The administrator wanted something from him as emperor. He had come here looking for something.

He had declared that none of the provinces would pay their taxes for an entire year. He could've been arrested for treason in doing so. If it wasn't a provocation and it wasn't meant to be disrespectful, Shohi could only think of one other reason. It was a plea for help. He had come in person, risking his life, to plead with the emperor to turn his focus toward the provinces.

Just as Rakusei had.

Yet I told him I would pardon the administrators of their crimes if he called off the prefectural forces. Their "crimes." I never understood just how hard their decisions must have been. Which is why Cho'un said he can't call them off.

Even if Shohi settled the matter with Ma Ijun, if his perspective didn't change, what would happen the next time something like this happened? The current economic disaster might have been intentional, but crop failures and natural disasters would happen again. The emperor and his court hadn't realized the situation until the last minute. They couldn't continue doing things this way. They had to be quicker to listen to the pleas from the lands outside the city.

Cho'un had come to the emperor, the highest authority in Konkoku, so that kindhearted administrators like Rakusei would never again be made into criminals.

Shohi felt like he suddenly understood something very important. He set down his chopsticks.

Something in the emperor's heart had fallen into place. At that moment, Shohi noticed he felt quite full. They had been such little bits of food, yet they had added up to a full belly. Even small things, when enough of them were added together, could grow into something large.

With his belly full and his frayed nerves soothed, a sense of calm came over

Shohi. So many things had suddenly become clear.

There might be something I can do.

The administrator seemed puzzled as he watched Shohi and set down his own chopsticks.

“Cho’un,” Shohi began quietly, “I am sorry. I have been blind to your thoughts, as well as those of the other administrators.”



Jotetsu and Hakurei shared shocked looks. Never in history had an emperor apologized to a prefectural administrator.

Hakurei stepped forward to admonish Shohi, but Jotetsu grabbed his shoulder.

“Hold on,” Jotetsu said in a sharp whisper.

“But His Majesty has to think of his position!” Hakurei said.

“He is. That’s exactly what he’s doing.”



Rimi closed her eyes, pretending she hadn’t heard a thing. She felt it was the polite thing to do. The emperor’s servants should pretend they hadn’t heard him apologize. But still...

His Majesty actually did it. He said something extremely important.

She was happy.

Being able to calm himself and choose the right words for the occasion, more than anything, showed the emperor’s bravery.

His Majesty is so strong.



Did he just apologize?!

Cho’un’s eyes widened in shock. Who could’ve imagined an emperor apologizing? And to a mere administrator? He was already surprised that he’d been offered a seat at the same table as the emperor, but to receive an apology? It was enough to upend everything Cho’un thought he knew about

royalty.

“I finally have a clear enough mind to see why you wanted to speak with me in person. I realize now just how crude my understanding of government has been. The administrators wanted to bring my attention to that, didn’t they? That’s what you’re here to tell me,” Shohi said. “You came to slap me across the face and shout ‘Look at us!’ And I, not understanding the reasoning behind it, reacted with confusion and anger. But I understand now. I have left everything to the administrators and paid no attention to the reports coming from the provinces. But this isn’t just about the provinces. I need to be more aware of everything. That was the message, wasn’t it?”

Cho’un, astonished, gazed at the emperor.

Emperors like him exist?

At their first meeting, Shohi had played the stereotypical emperor, sitting on his throne and flying into a rage over a simple declaration. But now, descended from his lofty throne and sitting across from Cho’un, he just seemed like an earnest young man. A young man who reflected on himself and showed no intention of sugarcoating his inadequacy.

It was shocking to hear the emperor speak so candidly. But it appeared he wasn’t done yet.

“I am not the great man that the first emperor of Konkoku was. Even I can tell that. But I do have a number of retainers. They may not wield great power, but they are endlessly loyal,” the emperor continued. He reached out and timidly ran his fingers along the edge of the nearest platter. “It was their actions that allowed me to meet you like this. I cannot satiate your hunger by offering to be a grand plate with the head of a cow. I am not strong enough. But perhaps I am like this meal. If I can gather up these little plates and hold them close, maybe I can still fill a belly.”

The words came as a shock to Cho’un. He hadn’t realized it until just then, but at some point, he’d gotten rather full. Briefly, his eyes flicked to the girl standing nearby. Flowers-for... No, Setsu Rimi.

“And I think I hold these little plates much more dearly than I would a great platter with a whole cow. I want to treasure them and keep them close,” Shohi

explained.

The emperor's words made Rimi smile.



Rimi couldn't hide her smile. Shohi had realized something vital, and her happiness for him was simply overwhelming.

The problem that Cho'un had wanted to raise with Shohi was a matter of his own awareness. It was why he'd said he couldn't just explain the issue. Once Rimi understood that, she'd wanted Shohi to understand it as well. She wanted him to see what was in the administrator's heart.

Fifty dishes each, placed before the two of them. Fifty different dishes served on one hundred plates. It was one meal for two people. Though each of them ate from their own plate, the meal was shared in name. By sharing, they had become interested in each other. Once they were interested, they had begun to truly see each other.

And finally, understanding. As their bellies had slowly filled, their minds had grown clear.

Rimi had named the meal baipinyiming, one hundred dishes on one plate. There was power in a name.

She hadn't chosen one hundred as a metaphor. Even if it was in two pieces, it was part of a shared whole. It was a step toward mutual awareness and understanding. That was the power of baipinyiming.



I see. So this was the emperor's plan. And I'm guessing the girl's one of his little plates, then, Cho'un thought.

While Shohi seemed to struggle to decide how he wanted to express himself, he continued speaking.

"I want to keep collecting these beautiful little plates. And if the administrators have come to slap me across the face, then I thank you for it and I apologize for my inadequacy. I want to express my respect for all of you. I humbly ask if you will serve me once more?"

Maybe it was his full stomach, but Cho'un felt a sudden warmth fill his body. He looked away slightly as a smile emerged on his face.

I've never heard of such a formidable emperor.

It would be utterly childish to reject someone speaking so honestly.

Honesty was the greatest of weapons. But most people, unable to wield it, chose to scheme and bewilder. Yet this emperor brandished honesty with such ease.

He was right, of course. Cho'un had come as the representative administrator to wake the emperor up with a slap. The emperor apologizing was, in effect, a victory for the administrators.

But somehow, Cho'un felt as if he'd been utterly crushed. Yet he could only view this defeat as refreshing. Perhaps it was because Shohi's way of fighting was forthright and honest, speaking of a brighter future.

If only we'd had an emperor like him in the old man's day.

Maybe Rakusei would still be alive today, raising his gaggle of stray children, if that had been the case.

"I see. Well then, let me speak my piece too," Cho'un said as he fought off the smile on his face and looked back up with his usual unreadable expression. "The prefectural administrators are appointed by the Minister of Revenue in your name. We are your retainers."

The administrator slowly stood up from the table.

"I am deeply grateful to receive Your Majesty's understanding. I will travel to Gokogen, inform the armies that I am safe, tell them of your intent, and ask them to withdraw," Cho'un continued respectfully.

Shohi could do nothing but blink in surprise for a while, but joy seemed to slowly boil up within him. A smile emerged on his face like sunlight breaking through clouds. Looking at the emperor's grin, Cho'un's own lips curled into a little smile once more. He didn't even realize he was smiling, and so he didn't notice when Rimi's eyes went wide and a broad smile broke out on her face.

The fifth emperor of Konkoku might just be a wise lord after all.



Master Cho'un smiled!

The eternally sullen bureaucrat from hell had smiled. Rimi's heart swelled at the sight.

"Really?" Shohi asked as he rose from the table. His smile was in full bloom.

"I will make my way there at once. Forgive me, but I will need to borrow a horse," Cho'un said.

"I'm going with you. I need to express my appreciation to the prefectural armies as well," the emperor said.

"The administrators would love that, but the troops might be worked up. What if something happens?"

"I don't care. If it's important, then I'm going. You said it yourself," Shohi said, dismissing Cho'un's concern.

Jotetsu, seemingly in support of the idea, stepped out from the partition's shadow and kneeled.

"I will accompany you, Your Majesty," he said.

"Please do," Shohi said.

"No matter what happens, I will protect your life with my own. No need to worry," Jotetsu said, his grin giving him an air of invincibility.

"Well then, we're off. Hakurei, inform Kojin and the ministers of the details! Cho'un, come with me," the emperor commanded.

Just then, a rustling sound emerged from Rimi's feet, and a little silver-furred creature darted out from her skirt.

"Tama?!" Rimi cried out in surprise.

Tama was supposed to be waiting in His Majesty's chambers, yet here she was. Something in the dragon's little blue eyes was sparkling. Overwhelmed with joy, she spun around three times like a little silver whirlwind and leaped up on Shohi's shoulder.

The emperor's eyes went wide.

“Quinary Dragon?!” he cried.

“The Quinary Dragon?! As in a divine dragon?!” Cho’un said, shocked by Shohi’s careless admission.

“Oh! Err, no, that is... This is Rimi’s pet! It’s just named ‘Quinary Dragon!’ It’s simply a rat!” Shohi said in a panic.

He pulled the dragon from his shoulder and held her in front of his chest as he offered the ridiculous excuse. Tama joyfully nuzzled at his chest, sniffing back and forth with her nose.

“Anyways, we must hurry to Gokogen. Rimi, take the rat, please,” he said.

Shohi passed Tama to Rimi. He then turned to leave with Jotetsu.

“Take care,” Rimi said with a deep bow.

Shohi suddenly stopped, turned back, and gave Rimi a grateful smile. He then turned around and set off quickly.

“You did good, Flowers-for-Brains,” Cho’un whispered as he passed Rimi.

She stared at him in blank amazement. He looked back for a moment and gave her a little mock frown before he left.

Rimi remained in a daze as she watched them leave. Eventually, Hakurei came up beside her.

“I’m shocked. I can’t believe the Quinary Dragon allowed His Majesty to hold it,” he said.

“She’s never done that before. And she looked so happy about it,” Rimi said.

It was like she’d found the master she’d been searching for. Even now, the dragon’s eyes glittered as she watched Shohi leave.

Hakurei patted Rimi softly on the head.

“You’ve done well, Rimi. I’m proud of you,” he said.

“Master Hakurei...” she said, looking up into his beautiful, golden-brown eyes. He responded with a kind smile.

It should’ve been Shusei standing in Hakurei’s place, but Shusei was gone.

Still, she had managed to fulfill her duty. Joy, and a sprinkling of pain, filled her heart.

Brilliantly done, my Umashi-no-Miya.

She could hear the old, familiar voice of her Saigu sister praising her. Even though Shusei was gone, even with all the pain and bitterness, she would be okay as long as she had faith in the pillar supporting her. The thought was encouraging.

Late that night, the administrator of An, Kan Cho'un, alongside the fifth emperor of Konkoku, Ryu Shohi, arrived in Gokogen where imperial forces and the prefectural coalition faced each other in a tense standoff.

While his arrival sent the imperial general into distress, Emperor Ryu declared he would enter the prefectural coalition's war camp alone. After shaking off the general's attempt to stop him, the emperor, Administrator Kan, and a single cavalryman arrived at the prefectural camp.

No further word was received until dawn.

As sunlight began to crest over the horizon of Gokogen, the prefectural armies began to withdraw their forces. Upon their return, the emperor, administrator, and cavalryman were all found to have suffered no injuries and returned to the imperial palace.

The following day, the emperor and Minister of Revenue jointly issued evidence to the Ministry of Personnel that exposed Ma Ijun's improper business practices. The Ministry of Justice was then notified, and Ma Ijun was soon imprisoned. The Ma Trade Association, which he presided over, was dissolved and all assets were seized. He, and all close family members, were exiled from the country.

The Ministry of Revenue distributed all seized assets from the Ma Trade Association to the five prefectures with instructions that the funds were to be assigned to the restoration of the prefectural economies.

Furthermore, by the emperor's command, the previous administrator of An, Kan Rakusei, who had died in prison under charges of treason, was declared

innocent of all wrongdoing and announced to be a man of honor. As Rakusei had never been given a grave, permission was granted to erect one for him in An. The citizens of An celebrated the decision.

It appeared the curtain had closed cleanly on the Ho House's secret plot.

III

Beneath the eaves of the Ho estate's main hall, Shusei watched the rustling bamboo with crossed arms.

Ho Neison approached Shusei, joined by a man in a strange, rather theatrical white mask and shenyi. They had been standing in silence for some time, wondering what they ought to say to Shusei. Neison was the first to speak.

"It's a shame it turned out like this. Mars and I spent years hatching that plan. We honestly believed it was foolproof."

It appeared that Neison thought Shusei was disappointed that the plan had failed. He was, of course, entirely off the mark.

"I never anticipated that the emperor would have the four consorts wrapped around his finger like that. It's a shame," Mars said, joining Neison in the attempt to cheer Shusei up. "I know it was a lot of work for little gain, but still —"

"On the contrary. The outcome never mattered. The plan achieved its goal in giving the Ho House what it needed," Shusei said.

Shusei looked back at the pair. Neison looked especially bitter.

"What are you talking about?" Neison asked. "Our goal was to set the provinces against the emperor and give them our support. That will never work now. The bond between the throne and the provincial governments is stronger than ever."

"That was Mars's plan. One I used as a basis for a plan in flux, something more adaptable. My goal was to make my presence known in the palace and to develop connections with the generals and ministers who viewed Ho Seishu—who view *me* favorably," Shusei explained.

Neison gave an impressed grunt at the revelation. Mars seemed to have been stunned into silence.

“I knew placing you as the head of our family was the right choice,” Neison said. He seemed almost fearful of Shusei’s meticulousness.

Shusei responded with a smile before turning his attention to Mars. He could see nothing behind the mask but dark eyes that gleamed with a shrewd light.

“Your plans have been half-hearted. But I am the master of this house now. The days of half-measures, of letting power slip from this family’s hands, are over. So, if you would, I ask that you follow my lead,” Shusei said, his eyes cold and his tone dispassionate.

Though it was phrased as a polite request, it was clearly a command from the head of their house.



“I know! I can hardly believe I’m here sipping tea like this,” Consort Yo said.

The consort, having satisfied herself with various sweets, placed her teacup on the table and gave a contented sigh. She smiled like she never had before.

The four consorts had gathered for tea at the Palace of Northern Peaks. Rimi had been the one to invite them, having promised she’d treat them to all sorts of delights when they’d finished their work for Shohi.

The Palace of Northern Peaks was still in the process of being remodeled. The main hall’s furniture and decorations had yet to be changed. They were seated around a table where sweets had been piled. Fried, sugar-dusted red bean paste rolls sat alongside fluffy steamed cakes covered in diced, dried fruit. Dried plums simmered in molasses, kaorizuke, salty pickled cherry blossoms, and slightly sweet gelatin sat side by side. She had brought all of the consorts’ favorites. All sorts of expensive teas, from jasmine to Golden Monkey tea, had been laid out as well.

Yo’s smile drew a concerned look from On.

“Are you doing all right?” she asked.

Since Ma Ijun and his relatives had all been exiled and the Ma Trade

Association had been dismantled, Rimi and the rest of the four consorts were all understandably worried about Yo. However, the Pure Consort looked indifferent.

“I’m fine. I’m a daughter of the Yo House now, so it’s got nothing to do with me. I’ve barely even met my half-siblings, so I’m not crying over them. And Ma Ijun got exactly what he deserved. The only one I’m really worried about is Mother, but...”

So gently placed a hand on Yo’s shoulder. Sensing her concern, Yo gave a big grin.

“Luckily for Mother, Ma Ijun apparently decided to leave her behind,” Yo revealed. “She’s just a nameless noblewoman now, and the Yo House was kind enough to take her in. I guess they think if they take care of her, it’ll be easier to get favors out of me.”

So, appearing to decide that Yo should not be forced to continue speaking about her situation, changed the subject.

“But Ho and On! What a terrible experience you went through. Detained by the cuisinologist? How dreadful!”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘dreadful.’ All he did was lock us in a room. Luckily, we had a way to get a letter out to—”

Ho suddenly clamped her mouth shut, stopping her words short. None at the table but Rimi knew the reason for her disgusted expression.

“Yes, we were able to get a message out. Thanks to that, we were safe and sound,” On said, picking up where Ho had left off. “If Ho hadn’t brought that bird with her, His Majesty would never have come for us. Thank you so much, Consort Ho.”

Ho’s expression twisted awkwardly at the praise and she looked down at her hands.

“It wasn’t mine,” she mumbled. “Hakurei had—”

“Pardon my intrusion,” called a gentle voice from the entrance, as if to cut off Ho.

They all turned their attention to see who it was and were greeted by Hakurei and his constant, enchanting smile. He gave a graceful bow and stepped inside.

“Forgive me for interrupting your tea, but His Majesty has requested Rimi come to his chambers,” Hakurei said.

Unbeknownst to the consorts, Tama was actually hiding beneath Rimi’s skirt. Before arriving for tea with the four consorts, she had intended to perform her daily duty of bringing Tama to Shohi so he could see that it was in good health. However, the emperor had been in a meeting, and she had been unable to see him. Jotetsu promised Rimi that Shohi would summon her once things had calmed down.

Rimi promised the consorts she would be back soon and followed Hakurei out of the building. Just as they had stepped onto the road leading directly south from the Palace of Northern Peaks, a sharp voice shouted Hakurei’s name. It was Consort Ho, racing toward them without any handmaidens.

Consort Ho?

The consort, who was usually the picture of refinement, was walking so briskly that her feet kicked the hem of her skirt. Hakurei waited for her with a puzzled expression. It wasn’t long before she caught up to the pair, and her chest heaved as she fixed the eunuch with a withering stare.

“Consort Ho? Is something the matter?” Rimi asked.

Ho bit her lip slightly.

“I had something I wanted to say to Hakurei,” she said.

“Did you have some business with me?” he asked. His expression was unreadable as he tilted his head.

Consort Ho took a deep breath, then a second one. It seemed she was trying to steel herself for something.

“Hakurei... Thank you,” she said.

Hakurei blinked rapidly in response. He seemed caught off guard.

“Thank you,” Ho said again. “The bird you gave me saved His Majesty, Consort On, and me. I wanted to thank you. But only for the bird. That’s all.”

Even as she was offering her gratitude, Ho stared daggers at Hakurei.

Consort Ho was a proud woman, and she had come to despise Hakurei, believing him to be a disrespectful, disgusting man. Even so, his actions had saved her, and her conscience would not allow her to go without thanking him for it.

Her peculiar expression of thanks was a perfect display of the contradictions within her heart.

“Oh, it was nothing,” Hakurei said.

Rimi didn’t think Hakurei had realized it, but he gave an entirely genuine smile. Looking at that smile, Rimi could tell that he loved everything about Consort Ho, even her contradictions.

Consort Ho trembled at his smile, but she quickly collected herself and looked away in a huff.

“I said what I came to say. I’m returning to the Palace of Northern Peaks. Lady of Precious Bevy, make sure you hurry back soon. We’ll be waiting for you,” she said and spun on her heel to leave.

Rimi and Hakurei saw her off with a bow. Once the consort was out of sight, they set off once more, exiting the inner gate and eventually leaving the rear palace entirely.

“I’m amazed she could express her gratitude while glaring at me so hatefully. It was quite a surprise,” Hakurei said with a bittersweet smile.

“She’s so cute,” Rimi said without thinking.

“That she is,” Hakurei agreed with a nod. He wore a much happier smile this time.

A warm feeling spread throughout Rimi’s breast. As much as Hakurei’s secret feelings tormented the man, they comforted him as well.

What about my feelings, then?

Just as Hakurei had locked his feelings deep inside of himself, Rimi had decided she would hide her own feelings for Shusei. But those feelings were causing her nothing but pain.

Hakurei and Ho both worked to protect Shohi, so they could afford to be comforted by their feelings. But Rimi yearned for Shusei, who had chosen to be Shohi's enemy.

Rimi wanted to see him, but the idea frightened her. The fact that she had no clue what he was plotting frightened her even more.

Still, when Cho'un had suggested that Shusei might have lied, Rimi felt like she had finally found the reason for the turmoil she'd been feeling.

When Rimi and Hakurei entered the Hall of the Rising Dragon and neared the emperor's chambers, they saw Kojin hurriedly leading Shohi out of the room with Jotetsu following behind.

Hakurei frowned.

"What's going on? His Majesty was going to rest after his meeting," he said.

The emperor looked pale and nervous. When he noticed Rimi and Hakurei, he said something to Kojin and they stopped walking, waiting for the pair to reach them. They hurried to the emperor's side and bowed.

"There's no need to bow," Shohi said hurriedly. "Something came up that I needed to discuss with the council. Could you wait in my chambers for a bit? Hakurei, come with me. I'd like your understanding of the rear palace as director."

"Has something happened?" Hakurei asked, confused.

"Some of the generals, ministers, and vice ministers have begun loudly denouncing His Majesty's actions," Kojin responded.

"His Majesty just handled a near-rebellion with the administrators and convicted Ma Ijun, who was responsible for ruining the economy! They should be praising him, not criticizing him," Rimi blurted out.

"My handling of the administrators is the whole problem," Shohi said spitefully.

"What?!" Rimi cried out.

"They're upset that the administrators, and especially Cho'un, weren't even rebuked. Some are saying that I favor provincial government officials over

central government ones. There are even bizarre rumors that I plan to summon provincial officials to the capital and send capital officials to the provinces,” Shohi explained. “And the army is furious that people from the provinces would dare march on the capital. They dislike that I allowed them to withdraw without punishment. The generals are incensed. They’re worked up to a point that it seems it might be the capital officials rebelling now.”

Rimi was speechless. It all seemed so ridiculous.

“That’s the sum of it,” Shohi concluded. “I’m sorry, Rimi, but I’ll need you to wait. Hakurei, come along.”

Rimi stared dumbfounded as the group turned to walk away at Shohi’s order.

“Just wait in His Majesty’s chambers,” Hakurei whispered gently before leaving.

Rimi didn’t even have a chance to respond.

It felt like they had finally managed to crest a mountain only to be greeted by a deep chasm.

Tama peeked her head out from beneath Rimi’s skirt and twitched her nose before suddenly darting out and leaping up to the walkway’s railing.

“Tama?!” Rimi cried.

The little dragon suddenly sprinted away atop the railing. Rimi was shocked. Tama hadn’t given any sort of signal that she was going for a walk, choosing instead to ignore Rimi and run off. If it had just been a little walk, Rimi might have left her alone, but Tama seemed different from usual. She couldn’t leave her like this.

Tama’s acting strangely again! I have to go after her!



Now it’s the capital officials threatening rebellion?

Shohi’s pace was swift and his fists were clenched in anger.

“It’s just one thing after another. It almost seems planned,” he said to himself.

His eyes suddenly widened.

Planned? Is this another scheme?

Shusei's face flashed through Shohi's mind. The emperor had faced the scholar head-on at the Ho estate and emerged victorious.

You've won this battle, he'd said.

The emperor shuddered as the words played back through his mind.

"This battle."

The implication being that there would be more battles, and Shusei would be the winner of the war. Were the events that were unfolding one of those battles?

Shusei had planned to bolster the Ho House with the might of the provinces. But he'd also considered what would happen if that failed.

When the provinces threw their weight behind Shohi, he must have immediately set about spreading rumors among the capital officials in order to sow discontent. *The emperor pardoned them because he prefers them to you.*

The army, meanwhile, had stood across a battlefield from prefectural soldiers, ready to kill. That anger had festered in their bellies, and yet the emperor had ordered them to lay down their swords. With those feelings of hate lingering on, they would surely not have been amused to hear the emperor was favoring the provincial authorities. It likely even made them paranoid.

I'm not sure what would've been worse, Shusei's plan succeeding or failing!

Success would have put the provinces behind the Ho House, while failure had put some of the capital officials behind them instead.

It was a thoroughly considered strategy that could adapt regardless of how things unfolded. A strategy in flux.

Shohi chewed his lip.

You said you didn't hate me, Shusei. So why are you doing this? If we let things continue to spiral out of control, we might end up in a life-or-death struggle, whether we want to or not!



Once Tama was out of the Hall of the Rising Dragon, she raced southward along the eaves of buildings and leaped to the wall of the Hall of Twin Dragons, which was used for housing and entertaining guests of honor. She then bounced down to the other side of the wall, sending Rimi scrambling toward the gate in pursuit. Passing around the side of the main hall and pushing her way through the plant fixtures, she found herself in a yard.

“Tama!” Rimi cried out.

Just as she did, her breath caught in her chest.

A stone had been placed in the center of the yard. Irises grew all around it with deep purple flowers and slender leaves like swords. There, among the irises, a tall young man stood—Shusei. He held Tama in front of his chest and was looking toward Rimi, sensing her arrival.

“Master Shusei? Tama, why?” Rimi asked.

Tama had surely sensed Shusei and went running after him. It was the second time she’d taken off to pursue him.

Why, Tama? When did you get so attached to Master Shusei? Is there something about him?

Shusei gave his old, friendly smile.

“I was surprised to see the Quinary Dragon come flying through the bushes. It’s dangerous to let it run too freely, Rimi,” he chastised.

“Why, Master Shusei? Why are you here?”

“I’d come to see how His Majesty was doing, but I was told I would have to wait. I was hoping to see him panic.”

Panic?

Shohi had certainly been in a panic from the news about the rebellious court officials. But how did Shusei know about that? And why would he specifically come to revel in it? There was only one answer. Shusei had been the one to plant the seeds in the first place.

The blood ran from Rimi’s face.

“Master Shusei, please. You have to stop. There has to be some other way to fill the hole inside of you,” she begged.

“Perhaps there is. But things have already been set in motion. There’s no stopping it now. No matter what you say, it’s too late. Now, take the Quinary Dragon and go.”

Shusei approached Rimi and held out Tama. But the dragon seemed to refuse, wriggling her way out of his hand and burying her nose in the scholar’s chest.

“What’s wrong, Tama?” Rimi asked

Shusei frowned and tried to pass the Quinary Dragon to Rimi again.

“Quinary Dragon, you cannot be getting attached to me. Come on now. Go.”

Tama, seemingly in resignation, allowed herself to be passed along. At that moment, Shusei and Rimi’s hands grazed each other.

Maybe he lied?

As their hands touched, Cho’un’s words played through Rimi’s mind.

Why would Shusei lie? Something had haunted her since their meeting beneath the rosewood, as if she was missing something terribly important. Now, she could finally see it.

“Why are you giving Tama back to me?” Rimi asked.

“I don’t need the Quinary Dragon’s power. I can only achieve what I desire with my own hands,” he responded.

That’s it!

Shusei’s words were a bolt of insight.

I’m right, aren’t I, Master Shusei? If that’s what you’re planning, then I...

As Rimi held Tama, she gazed up into the clever, kind eyes of the man she loved so unbearably.

“You aren’t planning to step down as master of the Ho House, are you? Are you ready for what’s to come? No matter what happens?” Rimi asked.

“Yes.”

Master Shusei... I love you so much. Even now. And I'm sure I always will.

The conviction in his voice broke Rimi's heart.

"I understand. In that case..." Rimi's voice trembled, but she managed to swallow her tears and glare up at Shusei with all the menace she could muster. "In that case, you are truly His Majesty's enemy. And so you are my enemy. But you're fine with that, aren't you?"

"Indeed. I am your enemy," he said.

His smile was suffocating.

The sun was shining brightly and early summer was already making itself known. The light splashed across Rimi's jade buyao, her hair, and her eyelashes. It all glistened eagerly, ready for the hour of summer to arrive.

The wind blew, cutting sharply between the leaves of the irises.



Afterword

Hello, everyone! Miri Mikawa here. Last volume, we had a major affair(?) with Shusei, and this volume follows up on that. Rimi and Shohi got up to a lot, but the hardest part for me was how to handle Shusei. I wasn't sure what direction I should take him as I worked on the plot, so I asked my editor what they thought of what I had. They had three words for me:

“The Horny Scholar.”

“The Horny Scholar” wasn't going to work for me, so Shusei ended up going in a different direction. Thanks to my editor, Shusei's dignity was preserved. He should be grateful.

Which is a good segue into saying thank you to my editor for always putting up with me. I'm sorry for all the trouble I cause, but I know I can always count on you!

Then there's Kasumi Nagi, who did the illustrations. Last volume's cover was so painfully beautiful. I'm spellbound every single time I look at it. The moon, the lilies, Shusei and Rimi's expressions, and the ambience around them, it's all absolutely brilliant. It was Jotetsu's cover debut as well and I was so happy to get to see him in color. Thank you for always providing such gorgeous illustrations.

And finally, to all you readers. Thanks to all of you, after a lot of struggling, I was finally able to get myself to Shusei's big moment. I am truly appreciative of all of you. Rimi, Shusei, and Shohi all have more trouble in store for them, but you'll just have to keep on reading.

Next time, I have plans to reintroduce a certain character. For now, I just hope you had a good time.

Miri Mikawa



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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 6

by Miri Mikawa

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